The Future of Hillville’s Park
A Scenario

For the past twenty-five years, the town of Hillville, New York, has had a park on 25 acres of municipally owned land. The park is minimally developed, with a dirt parking lot, about a dozen picnic tables, and several mowed fields. Initially, the park was used only lightly. However, increasingly the fields are being used regularly for informal ballgames, Frisbee, flying kites, or whatever people choose. Most of the rest of the 25 acres is undisturbed woodland that blends into the surrounding farm fields and hillsides.

Hillville is still a largely rural town. It includes one small village but no zoning or master plan. Historically, most residents were farmers, with others working in village businesses. A few commuted into the small city in the neighboring county. However, during the past five years, the town has grown by 20% as city residents have moved away from worsening urban problems. Most of the new residents still work in the city but choose to live in Hillville because of its low taxes, housing bargains, and rural character. Elections held 15 months ago changed the makeup of the town board. Two of the five representatives are now relative newcomers to the community.

After the election the Hillville Town Board began to consider what to do about the town park. Though it was not a major campaign issue, some board members had heard from a number of the newer town residents who think that the park is underdeveloped and that the town should respond to population trends and obviously growing use of the park. A variety of proposals for the town park have surfaced, including:

- Maintaining the park without any change in its current, minimally developed state;
- Making only minor changes, such as adding another dozen picnic tables and a swing set, a water spigot, developing some walking trails, and paving the parking lot;
- Developing the park into a multi-purpose recreation facility, including a baseball diamond, a town pool and tennis courts; and
- Tapping available state money to build an environmental education center on the property.

Further complicating these proposals is the fact that it has only very recently come to light that a local farm family, the Dodges, has been seeking to sell 60 acres of their farm. This land directly abuts the park and has been reverting back to forestland since it was last actively farmed a decade ago. Since the land was never posted, many residents have come to think of it as part of the park. However, rumor has it that the Dodges have been approached by an out-of-town developer interested in commercial development of part of the site. Many town residents are aware of this unconfirmed rumor. Some are excited and others appalled by this prospect. The Dodge land is directly accessible from a state highway, and with the town’s recent growth it seems plausible that the land might be attractive to a developer.
Already, differing opinions have been voiced about whether or not Hillville should try to pre-empt development by purchasing the Dodge property. Some residents are adamant about the need to preserve open space and feel that this purchase would help protect the character of the park and their community as a whole. They hope the community-minded Dodges would sell to the town at an affordable price. Others think that the town needs to expand (and certainly not reduce) its tax-base, create jobs, and grow the number of local retail and service businesses. Still others aren’t in favor of commercial development per se, but see an opportunity to subsidize the cost of the water and sewer extensions from the city district that would be required by the more intensive development proposals for the park.

At the most recent Board meeting the future of the park was on the agenda for the first time. Public turnout was surprisingly modest but a variety of strong opinions were expressed. Several individuals and groups promoted their agenda including: the local grange, the village business association, and a branch of the Sierra Club. Several teachers and parents spoke in favor of the environmental education center and the need for more activities for young people. The owner of a small trailer park replied that he “knew plenty of people” who had guessed what the environmental education idea was really all about: promoting zoning. He said these people would never come to speak up at a public meeting. A handful of seniors and other long-term residents expressed dismay at the possibility of increased tax burdens, and they complained about newcomers trying to make Hillville like the city they had left behind. Despite much speculation, no one seemed to have any up-to-date facts about the status of the Dodge property.

The Town Board, clearly concerned by the range of opinions and the vehemence with which they were expressed by some, decided to seek further input from residents.

While the Board itself will ultimately make the decision, they have agreed to follow residents’ recommendations, assuming the community can reach consensus on the two linked decisions, namely:

a) The future treatment of the park; and
b) What to do about the Dodge parcel

They have turned to you for advice. They have asked you to propose to them how to get residents involved in constructively considering the options. Before responding you’ve decided to create a stakeholder issue map as a way of getting a clear overview of situation.