

# Tribute to John Parr

## A NOTE FROM GLORIA RUBIO-CORTES AND DEREK OKUBO

We were shocked and saddened by the death of John Parr, his wife, Sandy Widener, and daughter Chase, in a Wyoming car accident on December 22, 2007. Our thoughts are with daughter Katy as she journeys through the healing process.

John Parr served NCL as president from 1985 to 1995 and reinvigorated the organization. In everything he did, he demonstrated his passion for good government and civic engagement. He broadened the scope of the organization, realizing that improving local government also meant improving local government's relationship with community sectors. Different points of view were simply a community reality. The key was getting these viewpoints to intersect into areas of agreement. John knew that such points could be established if these different viewpoints were included at the same table.

He believed in human potential, and it showed with his compassionate touch toward the people involved. Most important, he produced results, often accomplishing what was seemingly impossible at the start.

On a personal note, we were very fortunate to have been introduced by John to the National Civic League more than fifteen years ago. We remember him consistently demonstrating his brilliance in unique ways. He was as skilled at connecting facts and ideas as he was at connecting people. His mind was always churning, weaving ideas and strategies with facts and figures.

Walk into John's office and you would notice the stacks of note pads, files, books, and newspaper articles on his desk, the floor, and throughout his office. Despite the apparent clutter, John always

knew exactly where any document was at any time. We always imagined John's brain was organized in a similar way, with stacks and stacks of information at the ready. He was as generous with his information as he was with his time—mentoring many in the civic engagement field.

Most important, John demonstrated even more joy with his family and friends. When one was around his family, one could see that this family defined the words "tight-knit." John and Sandy's home was a constant source of activity that generated energy rather than draining it. They were fun people who loved life and the people who shared it with them. We hope they knew we loved them as much as we knew they loved us.

John's wondrous laughter is something that will stay with all who knew him. It is because of that joy and passion that his passing, and the passing of Sandy and Chase, leaves such a large, gaping void.

They will be greatly missed.

For this issue of the *National Civic Review*, which is dedicated to the memory of John Parr, we have asked a number of his friends and colleagues to contribute short essays on his many contributions to American civic life.

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*Gloria Rubio-Cortes is president of the National Civic League. Derek Okubo is senior vice president of the League.*

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## R. SCOTT FOSLER

In the mid-1980s, when the National Civic League (NCL) was seeking a new president, the candidate field was narrowed to two people with quite different profiles. One was a veteran manager of national

nonprofit organizations with little background in the civic field but experience in fundraising. The other was a young and successful civic activist from Denver with no prior national experience, nonprofit or otherwise. In a close vote, the job went to John Parr.

John was accustomed to close votes, for in addition to being a dedicated nonpartisan activist for civic causes he was also an effective partisan supporter of candidates for elected office. John knew firsthand how a community's future could be profoundly affected by a close vote for its elected leadership in a highly competitive election. His experience on both the nonpartisan and partisan sides of civic and political life put him firmly in the tradition of the league's founders, including such civic-activist-cum-partisan-politicians as Theodore Roosevelt. When the National Municipal League was founded in 1894, Roosevelt cautioned his fellow urban reformers against getting too caught up in their soaring civic rhetoric, because, he said, "In the end, the work has got to be done by actual hard, stubborn, long-continued service in the field of practical politics itself."

John Parr turned out to be precisely the right person to lead the National Civic League in the next stage of its journey as an agent of civic change in twentieth-century America.

### **The Civic Impulse**

The organization was founded in 1894 as the National Municipal League, later changed its name to the Citizens Forum on Self-Government, and under John Parr became the National Civic League, at which time the title of the chief executive officer was changed from executive director to president, and the head of the board of directors from president to chairman. Meanwhile, the National Civic League headquarters was relocated from New York City to Denver, and a branch office was established in Washington, D.C.

The men and women who founded and guided the league in its earlier stages were a remarkable group of people. Their task was nothing less than to determine how—and whether—it was possible to democratically govern the modern industrial city, a product of the urbanization, industrialization, and immigration that had transformed America in the nineteenth century. The civic impulse that launched them on this daunting task embodied the core values that have continued to define the essence of the National Civic League for more than a century. They firmly believed that the key to a successful democracy was an informed citizenry actively engaged in the political process and equipped with the tools they need for self-governance. The League's principal role was to "simplify the public's business so the citizen could be master of his task."

The early reformers juggled two variations of the American concept of democratic liberty: *ordered liberty* and *reciprocal liberty*. Of the two, ordered liberty was favored for the work at hand. It was a concept grounded in the tradition of the consensual town meeting, placing great weight on the interaction of practical experience and intellectual authority and working to present authoritative models of orderly government structures that would effectively and efficiently carry out the wishes of citizens. Examples of the League's early initiatives were model city and county charters and the council-manager model, which fused the elements of democracy and administration in a single package to promote effective, efficient, and responsive municipal government.

### **The New Civic Challenge**

By the time John Parr became president of the League in the mid-1980s, the urban landscape of the United States had changed dramatically. The modern industrial city had evolved into the postmodern service metropolis. The threshold problem was that urban areas had grown far beyond the territorial political jurisdiction of their original "city" without creation of corresponding governing

structures. A motley array of new government units popped up to fill the gap, with few if any overarching structures capable of integrating them in order to address an expanding agenda of metropolitan-scale problems. The NCL was one of the first national organizations to recognize the “metropolitan area” problem as early as 1925, and the fact that little progress was made in addressing it over the ensuing half century testified to just how intractable a problem it was.

The expanding metropolis was also changing dramatically in its composition. Manufacturing jobs were moving out of the central city to the periphery of metropolitan areas, or leaving them altogether. The new service and emerging information economies were unevenly distributed throughout the metropolitan region, reinforcing housing patterns that captured the elderly, poor, and racial minorities in deteriorating central cities, while more affluent white residents moved to the suburbs and exurbs along with many of the new professional and technical jobs. Meanwhile, another wave of immigration was bringing new energy and even greater diversity to the nation’s urban areas. These conditions created a whole new generation of complex challenges, including rapid growth at the periphery combined with decline of the core, urban poverty and crime, environmental pollution, failing schools, and racial and ethnic tensions—challenges that no single government, in fact no combination of governments, could handle on its own.

Ad hoc experimentation in response to these pressures at the state and local levels generated some promising new approaches: private sector initiatives, public-private partnerships, community-based non-profit organizations, grassroots networks of civic activists, and “entrepreneurial governments” using an eclectic mix of market-based and performance-oriented tools. But none of these approaches alone was sufficient, and each came with its own costs. Meanwhile, local politics in many places had deteriorated into a mechanistic solicitation of votes and

power brokering based on the demonization of opponents and hostile finger pointing devoid of any real consideration of the public interest.

### A New Civic Model

John Parr understood from his firsthand experience that the core of the problem lay in a mismatch between the numerous highly interdependent political actors in urban regions and the virtual absence of corresponding civic processes for collective deliberation, consensus building, and collaborative problem solving. He assembled a talented staff and worked closely with an engaged board of directors at the National Civic League to develop a new civic model of “citizen democracy,” or “community democracy,” to address this need.

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One of John’s key insights was that although the original core values of the Civic League founders were still valid, the relative balance of those values, which had initially favored the ordered-liberty perspective of American democracy, needed to shift toward reciprocal liberty. In the latter tradition, authoritative solutions are generated through the interactions among adults of equal status, working through their common problems and needs on the basis of mutual respect, in order to deal with the situation at hand. It favored a flexible approach to political and civic engagement to deal pragmatically and cooperatively with variable situations in a more fluid manner. This did not mean retreating from

one's core principles, but rather working more deliberately and inclusively to find common ground and solve mutual problems to the benefit of everyone. It also narrowed the range of issues to be resolved by the costlier processes of direct political competition and legal resolution, which are more dependent on authoritative governmental structures.

Under John's leadership, the NCL began to develop the tools required to flesh out this new model and apply it to a range of public problems. This in no way constituted a rupture with the league's traditions. To the contrary, it involved a deft combination of change to address the new challenges of the present, and continuity that honored and built on the accomplishments and knowledge of the League's past. It was a classically pragmatic American approach that said, in essence, Let's not spend a whole lot of time trying to alter or realign the institutional structures already in place except where absolutely necessary and politically feasible; rather, let's focus on making those structures perform as best they can, individually and—especially—collectively, to solve the particular problems at hand.

### A Cluster of Reinforcing Elements

The NCL's new civic model bundled together several interrelated concepts, including governance, community, collaboration, problem solving, civic infrastructure, leadership, and performance, which combined to produce a pragmatic package aimed at creating a capacity for collaborative governance and community problem solving. This conceptual creativity alone, a product of the classic League formula of interacting theory and practice, was in itself a major contribution that influenced thinking and practice far beyond the immediate orbit of the League and continues to reverberate into the present. But John's bias for action and insistence on producing practical help for civic activists and tangible results for the public also led the NCL, again in classic League fashion, to generate the *tools* that would equip citizens to put this cluster of concepts to practical use.

The earlier League emphasis on ordered liberty had generated a whole new set of well-ordered, authoritative government structures, which have served American communities well and continued to constitute the base for both democratic action and governmental performance. The new NCL emphasis on reciprocal liberty began to add yet another generation of more fluid governance processes through which both the governmental and the nongovernmental structures could work together more nimbly and effectively. "Governance," the process by which collective ends and means are determined and pursued, required a multisectoral approach that looked beyond government to the other sectors of society—business, nonprofit organizations, citizen groups—whose actions were critical to meeting common goals. In keeping with this shift, the League renamed its annual National Conference on Government, first held in Philadelphia in 1894, the National Conference on *Governance*.

The governance challenge was not limited to "the city," which was the original target of urban reformers, and which remained in the public mind the political jurisdiction of the original core city. It also encompassed the de facto urban community, which comprised the metropolitan region and its component neighborhoods, as well as the original core city. The NCL All-America City Award (AAC) program was adapted to reflect this shift by expanding eligibility to that wider array of communities. The concept of community also needed to be inclusive of the widening diversity of citizens, organizations, and networks, and more attentive to the issues of social equity that separated them.

The key to effectively addressing civic problems in this new environment was collaborative governance and community problem solving among all sectors—government, business, nonprofits, and citizens. To this end, the League established the Community Assistance Team (CAT) to supply customized, expert technical assistance in consensus-based decision making and broad-based citizen participation. CAT

(which is now known as Community Services) experts helped communities convene representatives of every sector and perspective and worked with them to address community problems. They helped citizens in community visioning, strategic planning, leadership training, and performance measurement. They also assisted communities in fashioning their own programs for civic public journalism and “Healthy Communities” initiatives, among others. The League’s Program for Community Problem Solving (PCPS) offered expert training, facilitation, research, and technical assistance to help communities develop a civic culture that would nurture and support community problem solving.

Effective governance of the new urban community also required a new form of leadership that did not depend on superheroes riding to the rescue. Community-oriented leadership could come from any corner of the community, and it might be exercised in a collective manner. Former NCL Chairman John W. Gardner cited the important leadership role of what he called “community guardians,” individuals with a talent for convening diverse and often adversarial groups and getting them to work together on public problems of mutual concern to all of them.

Community democracy and governance also required a new, more constructive kind of deliberative politics, in place of the hostile and antagonistic politics that had crippled so many communities. The league’s intent here was to help communities create a political environment in which participants could be active, informed, and vigorous in advocating their positions but do so in a constructive manner that would bring out what was best among the competing political perspectives, in the interest of healthy public debate and community problem solving. This eventually led to the NCL’s New Politics program, which worked with citizens and elected officials at the state and local levels to foster innovation in political reform by critically evaluating a community’s entire political system, and linking political reforms with models for effective governance.

Central to the new civic model was the development of “civic infrastructure,” the formal and informal processes and networks through which communities make decisions and attempt to solve problems. To help communities define their own civic infrastructure, and assess and improve their performance, the League developed the Civic Index, a framework that provided a method and a process for identifying strengths and weaknesses, and for structuring collaborative solutions to problems. The elements of the Civic Index were also integrated into the All-America City Award program to reinforce the performance orientation in linking civic action to tangible results for communities.

From its founding, the League worked to build a national civic infrastructure to support citizens in reform efforts throughout the country. The League itself was one of the first components of that national infrastructure, and it encouraged creation and development of a wide network of organizations and individuals joined together in common effort. To further develop the potential of those networks, the League initiated the Alliance for National Renewal, a coalition of three hundred national and local organizations dedicated to the principles of community renewal. Working together, these organizations highlighted innovations (documented in a quarterly newsletter called *The Kitchen Table*) and promoted connections between organizations and individuals that could help communities renew them.

To further the League’s long-standing dedication to information sharing and adult civic education, the NCL journal, *National Civic Review*, which was first published in 1913, continued to generate a lively exchange of ideas and practical information on a range of civic issues, including a full airing of the new civic model.

### **Personal Leadership and Stewardship**

John Parr’s leadership of the National Civic League during this period was itself a model of the values he

was working to promote. His passion for an inclusive and robust civic enterprise, combined with his own personal modesty and generosity, attracted talented civic activists from every corner. He felt it to be his own personal mission to develop skills of working together across divisions of party, faith, race, income, and geography to address common issues. People trusted John for the simple reason that he was trustworthy. He also knew what he was doing, and if he didn't know the answer to a problem he knew how to go about getting it, which invariably meant enthusiastically engaging others who might have more knowledge and experience on the matter than he did. John was a born connector and networker, making friends and sharing ideas with everyone, wherever. It would be impossible to estimate the countless number of communities, organizations, and individuals John Parr and his colleagues touched during his time with the League, or their continually reverberating impact.

Paradoxically, John's preparation for creatively tackling city problems was helped immensely by the fact that he was a "grounded" guy, literally, with roots in the country. He was raised on a farm in Indiana and participated actively in the joint enterprise of the family farm, winning several 4-H competitions for animal husbandry. This experience gave him a deep respect for the agricultural society from which our modern urban culture emerged, and it disabused him of the more naïve notions of the romance of real farming (which no doubt was one of the reasons his wife and partner, Sandy Widener, had trouble getting him to do yard work). It also intensified his fascination with the dynamics of urban life, while giving him a degree of intellectual detachment and bemusement (he had a keen and often wicked sense of humor) that helped him become a superb analyst and diagnostician of urban dynamics. This in turn helped him be a highly effective practitioner. John combined a thirst for ideas and good theory with the pragmatist's insistence on determining what works.

One of the great strengths of the National Civic League throughout its centuries-spanning history has been continuity of leadership, even as the organization often went through monumental changes to keep abreast of America's fast-changing civic challenges. This is a tradition that John Parr honored. He succeeded League President William Casella, who continued to be a valued advisor throughout John's tenure, and was succeeded in turn by Christopher Gates, whom John had brought to the NCL as its vice president. Chris was eventually succeeded by the NCL's current president, Gloria Rubio-Cortes, whom John had also brought to the NCL staff for a stint as a key staff member earlier in her career.

By the time John Parr left the NCL in 1996, the new civic model developed under his leadership was widespread in practice at the local level, recognized and better understood in theory by academics, and mainstream in the national civic network. And so the league was prepared to move on to the next generation of cutting-edge issues. These included developing ever more effective means of collaborative governance and community problem solving that could cross organizational and sectoral boundaries to link government, citizens, businesses, nonprofit organizations, and the media in the common enterprise of addressing the public needs of America's communities.

Thanks to the leadership and stewardship of John Parr, the original civic impulse that created the National Civic League in the nineteenth century, and that propelled it throughout the twentieth century, was alive and flourishing at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

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## HENRY CISNEROS

John Parr was a man solidly in the tradition of populism in the American West. He was a populist in the way he believed that every citizen has rights and responsibilities, which are the basis of America's communities. He advocated for a conception of government that enhances the lives of average citizens, an inclusive concept that addresses the needs of people who have been disenfranchised by the unfairness of bureaucracies and exploitative corporations. He worked all his life to make the institutions of our society live up to their responsibilities and to fulfill their obligations.

John was also a man of the West, grounded in the land and in the culture of the great American open spaces. Of all of the cities in our nation in which he and his family could have lived, he chose Denver. James Michener, the iconic author who wrote movingly about Alaska, the Chesapeake, Texas, and Colorado, once told me Denver was his favorite place. Denver, he said, straddles urban and rural traditions. It is a city that is modern but honors the outdoor traditions of the pioneers. From my conversations with John, I came to understand why Denver and Colorado were so important to him. He respected the land, loved the outdoors, and enjoyed time with his family in the mountains. John wore cowboy boots and in demeanor could have passed for one of the early settlers. He articulated the practical, rooted, commonsense ideas I associate with people who are shaped by the topography of the land and who, because they know the natural world, are respectful of their place within it.

I first met John Parr when he was president of the National Civic League and came to visit me in San Antonio after I had completed my terms as mayor there. We discussed my joining the NCL board of directors and serving as its chairman. The League had a long and distinguished record as the premier voice in the United States for civic engagement in American communities. It had developed a national

reputation for the All-America City Awards, which are widely regarded as the most prestigious and sought-after recognition for a city in the United States. I agreed to serve and worked closely with John for several years in the early 1990s.

It was clear to me from the beginning of our working relationship that John's convictions about the values of civic participation at the local level were grounded in his experiences with citizens engaged in making their communities better. We framed a working principle for the National Civic League, which was to promote "citizen democracy." John correctly sought to elevate democracy beyond an abstract concept, beyond just a process of elections. His idea was to reenergize our democracy at the neighborhood and community level.

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John also acted imaginatively to develop the tools and methods by which the concept of citizen democracy could advance basic democratic principles in our modern society. What he understood so well was that just as every other dimension of society has changed and evolved over time, so too must the manner in which we exercise our democratic responsibilities. America is changing in its scale, its technologies, living patterns, demographics, financial arrangements, and communications systems. For the interconnections between citizens, the glue that holds us together in a society, to be relevant and effective in a modern sense, it would be necessary to consider how to make democracy meaningful for modern Americans. John constantly pushed us to

think through issues of voter participation, making electoral systems more accessible, and exploring new ways to involve citizens in having voice through community participation, using public services and public facilities to bring communities together. His vision moved the National Civic League forward and advanced ideas for enhancing our democracy.

John was attentive to the organization, finances, and management of the National Civic League. The *National Civic Review* became a respected forum for ideas about citizen democracy. The criteria for the All-America City Award were expanded to recognize inclusive governance in communities. John did a good job as an administrator, organizing the board, sustaining the organization's finances, and enhancing its voice. Here was a person who had a clear vision for the future and who could also effectively act on his ideas because his managerial and executive skills were strong.

As I look back on those years and other periods of John's career, I am struck by the consistency of his commitment to public ideals. He was a serious man who also had a vibrant sense of humor and an easy manner with people. He thought deeply about what is good for our society, without being patronizing or aloof in any respect. He understood and respected the wisdom in every person and the good that each citizen can do. His work in Colorado's state government and in Denver's city government taught him to respect the citizens who are the resources for governmental action.

John served our country well as a citizen who made our public discourse better by his work and as a good man who made everyone around him better by his example. I admired his wisdom and his steady, patient manner. I wish that there were more leaders like him. One of the great narratives in American public life is that of the decent man from the heartland who touches people's lives by his strength of character and irrepressible ideals. That was John Parr. I have immeasurable respect for the

way he worked to advance democratic ideals, never forgetting their importance in the daily lives of people.

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*Henry Cisneros, a former U.S. secretary of housing and urban development and mayor of San Antonio, Texas, is executive chairman of CityView.*

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### FEDERICO PEÑA

John Parr was a good man. He cared about people. He longed to improve the spirit of communities. He believed that neighborhoods could be vibrant, cities healthy and exciting, and states environmentally sustainable. Most of all, John loved life.

I first met John in the early 1970s when he was a member of Governor Dick Lamm's administration. He supported my work in improving educational opportunities for minority school children. He believed that women and minorities could contribute to state government, and he sought out qualified individuals to serve on state boards and commissions. Now accepted practice, John Parr initiated this legacy when it was not popular. It was a quiet but effective effort.

Doing things quietly but effectively was John's style. He sought no public recognition, no title, and usually little compensation. It was John Parr, along with three friends, who in 1982 took me to lunch at Don Quijote Restaurant and detailed how I could be elected mayor of Denver. Although I had my doubts, John was quite persuasive. John quietly and effectively showed me past voting results and demonstrated why a little-known legislator could win against all odds. Later, he was one of my key strategists and advisors when I ran for mayor in 1982. He organized business and civic leaders to recommend business practices to my new city administration, and most of those recommendations made our government operations more modern and efficient. When we needed a comprehensive Denver Plan to shape a new direction for our city, which was mired in a recession, John was a key player.

John was always thinking. You could tell when he was explaining a unique solution to a problem because he would stroke his beard while he spoke. That's when one needed to focus on John's every word. He was also a voracious reader and an extraordinary listener. If you asked him about some subject, he would reference a book and oftentimes send it to you marked with yellow tabs. I can still remember John's signature opening line in a conversation: "Have you ever thought about . . ." followed by a fascinating idea or new approach to a complex problem.

I can still remember John's signature opening line in a conversation: "Have you ever thought about . . ." followed by a fascinating idea or new approach to a complex problem.

I worked with John on the Front Range Study, which he directed. This effort foresaw the growth along the Colorado Front Range, or "I-25 Corridor," which, without some planning and forethought, would simply develop into a "California-like" development corridor without much attention to quality-of-life issues.

He became the president of the National Civic League in 1985. John was a perfect leader for an organization that brought progressive and modern practices to local governments across the country. Later, John continued his civic work through a newly formed company called Civic Results. He was in great demand across the country as he assisted communities working through tough challenges. It would be impossible to quantify all the communities, thousands of citizens, and hundreds of political and civic leaders John Parr touched. Clearly, America's political, environmental, and community landscape has been changed because of John Parr.

In 1998, I moved back to Denver from Washington, D.C., and bought a home next door to the Parrs. We would frequently visit, and our kids loved playing with one another. John and his wife, Sandy, were always kind and thoughtful to all the neighborhood children who frequently concentrated at the Parrs' home. John was particularly kind to the Peña kids, making a wooden sword for Ryan, and taking Nelia, Cristina, Chase, and Katie off to some event. We enjoyed chasing their dog around our yard or looking for rabbits that had escaped their cage. It was during this time that I was able to fully appreciate John Parr the father, husband, friend, and neighbor.

John Parr was extraordinarily unique. Sandy was equally wonderful and talented. His daughter Chase was a marvel. We now pray for the full recovery of his youngest daughter Katie. And we will miss him.

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*Federico Peña, a former mayor of Denver, U.S. secretary of energy, and secretary of transportation, is a managing director with Vestar Capital Partners.*

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#### **KEN SNYDER AND RICH MCCLINTOCK**

Civic institutions both locally and nationally mourned John Parr's tragic death. In our experience working with John closely over the past decade, we knew him both as a colleague and as a mentor. As Colorado Governor Bill Ritter recently said of John and his wife, Sandy Widener, "John and Sandy made untold contributions—small, large, and every size in between—and touched untold lives." We have attempted to describe below the range and scope of people and groups he affected in a lifetime spent as a civic catalyst. One great sign of his impact is the fact that so many of these groups continue to grow and thrive today.

John was the first state director of the first state chapter of Common Cause, a nonprofit organization fighting for open, honest, and accountable government. John was also the founding director of the Center for Public-Private Sector Cooperation at the University of Colorado at

Denver, a technical assistance and research center that encourages and publicizes cooperative problem-solving efforts and helps define criteria for successful partnership activities.

As president of the National Civic League, John moved the office from New York City to Denver, built a strong international program, and took on countless other national civic roles. He was a fellow of the National Academy for Public Administration, worked with the National Policy Consensus Center, and became an associate of the Citistates Group working on issues of regional governance in the United States.

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Following his tenure at the NCL, John helped to launch a public policy program at Denver University, and then in 1997 he cofounded (with Peter Kenney and Katherine Archuleta) the Center for Regional and Neighborhood Action (later christened Civic Results), whose mission is to create results through collaborative civic engagement.

Civic Results helped cofound and has furnished ongoing staff support for the Metro Mayors Caucus, an alliance of the mayors of the thirty-seven cities and towns that make up the Denver metropolitan region. The caucus is a unique collaboration of elected officials offering leadership and creative solutions on some of the most challenging issues in our region by using consensus. The caucus has emerged as a voice for collective action on regional issues that cannot be effectively addressed by any jurisdiction acting alone. The caucus has been able to effect positive change throughout the entire metro

area, working on issues of growth management, multimodal transportation, environmental leadership, affordable housing, emergency response, and intergovernmental cooperation.

He worked closely with Rich McClintock (coauthor) to create the Livable Communities Support Center (LCSC). John was always full of ideas about how we could make communities more livable, and his eyes lit up with every new inspiration. For example, LCSC, the Metro Mayors Caucus, and other partnerships, all with John's help, worked with smart growth allies to build support for FasTracks, a measure in the Denver metro region to add \$4.7 billion in new funding for rail and other transit. FasTracks passed 58–42 percent in November 2004, adding 120 miles of commuter rail, light rail, and expanded bus services. LCSC developed other numerous partnerships under John's guidance on issues ranging from affordable housing to regional land use planning and more recently healthy community design. The program continues to this day and is currently being very capably staffed by program director Paige Heydon McCrary.

John Parr and Peter Kenney helped Ken Snyder (coauthor) take his work at the U.S. Department of Energy developing land use planning tools and supported him in the development of a nonprofit spin-off, PlaceMatters. Together they organized national discussions on decision-making tools and processes. They further encouraged Ken to expand his focus to include tools and techniques available to tackle issues of land use, transportation, community development, and sustainability. From these discussions, the concept of creating an organization that worked to engage communities in democratic, integrative place-based planning emerged, and John offered to be a fiscal sponsor to house, incubate, and mentor the program through Civic Results. That support allowed Ken to focus on program and resource development and made it possible to build an organization. They learned from each other. Ken helped Civic Results add technical tools to their offerings,

and together they learned about tools that help increase civic participation and help communities more effectively plan for their futures. Without the early support of John and Civic Results, PlaceMatters would not exist today.

John was the founding president and CEO of the Alliance for Regional Stewardship (ARS), a national network of practitioners from the public, private, and nonprofit sectors who are using regional approaches for community problem solving in both urban and rural areas. Most recently he served as ARS senior counsel. While president of ARS, John worked to publish a monograph series on topics of interest to regional stewards, such as community decision making, leadership development, and regional governance.

“I helped [John] produce eight conferences for the Alliance for Regional Stewardship,” recalls civic conference planner Linda Smith. “He was an honorable, heartfelt man. I used to tease him that I concocted a game called ‘The Six Degrees of Separation from John Parr.’ Whatever city I traveled to, I could walk up to a group of people and ask the question, ‘Does anyone here know John Parr?’ and unfailingly over a six-year period someone always replied ‘Yes!’”

Several additional groups that John mentored closely during that time were intentionally co-located within the Civic Results office, among them the Neighborhood Resource Center and the Community Development Partnership Network, a national network of local community development funder collaboratives. He helped create and then directed the early stages of the Metro Denver Health and Wellness Commission, which is a broad-based civic initiative to make Denver the healthiest metropolitan region in the country.

Just before his untimely death, John was still hard at work building new civic alliances. He helped Rich Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods*, found the Children and Nature Network, which has rapidly

built local social networks of people and organizations committed to building a back-outside-and-into-nature movement that has been often referred to as “No Child Left Inside.”

John was also working with Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper and his staff to make the 2008 Democratic National Convention the most sustainable, healthiest, most “lean and green” convention ever, with opportunities ranging from eco-friendly food at restaurants to being able to use one of the thousand bikes that will be available for destinations throughout downtown during the Democratic convention.

“We cherish our memories of John and Sandy and their daughter Chase,” says Mayor Hickenlooper. “They made us better people. They made Denver a better city, and Colorado a better state.”

To learn more about any of the groups mentioned or to contribute to a family fund in John’s name, go to [www.civicresults.org](http://www.civicresults.org) or <http://johnsandychase.muchloved.com>.

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*Ken Snyder is CEO and president of PlaceMatters. Rich McClintock is principal of Livable Places Consulting and was the founding program director of the Livable Communities Support Center.*

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#### **MATTHEW MCKINNEY**

I first met John Parr in 1979. He was working for Governor Richard Lamm and I was an undergraduate student at Colorado State University. Having grown up in Boulder, Colorado, reading about the water wars between the eastern and western parts of the state, and observing the development of land along the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains, I developed an early interest in how society makes decisions about land use, water, and natural resources.

John was convening the Front Range Project, one of the earliest attempts at regional planning in

Colorado. I was intrigued by the vision of this effort—a plan to coordinate growth across multiple cities and counties along Colorado’s Front Range. I watched John work, facilitating a group of elected officials and others. He graciously invited me to attend meetings and participate in the dialogue, and he helped me prepare more than one research paper on the project.

This initial interaction with John’s work and personality significantly shaped my subsequent professional career. After earning a Ph.D. in natural resource policy and conflict resolution, I worked as a water policy analyst and planner, directed the Montana Consensus Council, and now hope to inspire future leaders to adopt the worldview of collaborative governance through our work at the University of Montana’s Public Policy Research Institute.

Over the years, John and I stayed in touch. About eight years ago, I started working in partnership with the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy to develop a research, education, and outreach program on regional collaboration. Our premise for this work is that “working across boundaries” is fast becoming one of the major puzzles in land use, natural resource, and environmental policy. Two fundamental points define this puzzle. First, the territory of many such problems transcends the legal and geographic reach of existing jurisdictions and institutions (public, private, and other). This mismatch between the geography of the problem and the geography of existing institutions leads to the second point: the people affected by such problems have interdependent interests, which means that none of them have sufficient power or authority to adequately address the problems on their own.

After scanning the literature and Websites to see who was doing what, I was not too surprised to find that John was cofounder and president of the Alliance for Regional Stewardship. I was excited to reconnect with John, and he was very interested in our emerging program.

From 2000 until his untimely passing, John helped us develop an understanding of regional approaches to land use and natural resource management. He helped shape and participated in workshops in Cambridge, Massachusetts; Orlando, Florida; Nashville, Tennessee; Salt Lake City, Utah; Seattle, Washington; and Calgary, British Columbia. We coauthored a couple of articles and had lots of fun debating the similarities and differences among regional approaches to urban areas, watershed, river basins, ecosystems, and bioregions.

Throughout all of these experiences, John taught me (and, indirectly, a lot of other people interested in regional collaboration) a few important lessons. First, he almost always insisted on grounding any conversation about working across boundaries in human nature. Specifically, he emphasized that most people most of the time are motivated by self-interest. He said that we did not have to like this particular attribute of human nature, but we should assume it as a given. The practical implication is that people will think and act regionally—that is, across jurisdictional, sectoral, and disciplinary boundaries—when it is in their self-interest to do so. Ironically, John was one of the least self-interested people I have ever met. He was genuinely motivated to do the right thing for the right reason, regardless of what it meant to him personally.

Second, he urged us to think of regional collaboration more as a political campaign, not an exercise in rational planning *per se*. John like to remind us that trying to mobilize and engage people to work collaboratively, regionally or otherwise, is fundamentally a political activity. It is a process of encouraging people from all walks of life to jointly name public problems, frame alternative solutions, deliberate about the trade-offs and consequences, and ultimately make a decision to do something.

Finally, John was always focused on results. Almost to the point of obsession, he tried to figure out how to help citizens and leaders transform regional

visions into action. Over the past few years, any discussion on regional collaboration always made its way back to this conundrum: how to implement a regional vision, plan, or agenda across multiple jurisdictions that have their own needs and interests. John emphasized that this is a matter of both civic and political will, and we enjoyed debating the dynamics of this interplay.

The day before John passed away, I talked to him about a book that some of my colleagues and I are writing on regional collaboration. This book project (I hesitate to call it a labor of love) has been a work in progress for two or three years, and John has been there at every step. John was very excited and enthusiastic about the most recent draft of the book, and he was looking forward to reviewing it over the holidays and joining us in Cambridge in early January to discuss the manuscript.

I will miss John's contribution to our book, our work on regional collaboration, and his dedication to improving our systems of democracy, citizen participation, and public dispute resolution. I will miss his graciousness, his humor, his willingness to contribute to whatever project we were working on, and his passion for public service. I am deeply honored to have known John, to have worked side-by-side with him on several projects, and to count him as a friend, mentor, and colleague.

I echo the suggestion by regionalist William Dodge that it is high time to convene a national conference on the status of regionalism. Such a conference would be one way to acknowledge John's contribution to this emerging field of regional collaboration. It would also be a provocative forum to continue the conversation on the similarities and differences among regional approaches to urban areas, watershed, river basins, ecosystems, and bioregions.

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## DOUG HENTON

John Parr was an uncommon American citizen. I had the opportunity to work closely with John as we developed the Alliance for Regional Stewardship, a national network of regional leaders committed to solving economic, environmental, and social challenges in their communities in more collaborative ways.

We had a common mentor in John W. Gardner, the founder of Common Cause and Independent Sector, who helped us found the Alliance for Regional Stewardship. He chaired the National Civic League when John Parr was president. John Parr was also active in Common Cause, and he wrote a seminal document of regional collaboration titled "Boundary Crossers," working with John W. Gardner as well as Neal Peirce and others.

I remember John Parr as a gentle man who always cared deeply about issues and knew that the best way to solve problems was to bring together diverse groups and help them find innovative ways to meet their challenges. He organized major campaigns by helping people understand why it was in their self-interest to join together to solve common problems. He had a unique combination of idealism and pragmatism that helped people see how they could rise above current reality to achieve a desired future together.

For example, John took on major challenges such as improving transportation in the Denver region and helping to organize a successful campaign to help solve the problem working with a broad coalition of people. John was a natural-born coalition builder who knew how to bring diverse groups together for a common purpose. In his life's work, he was able to put into practice the collaborative leadership that John W. Gardner wrote about so eloquently when he described building community based on diversity.

John also cared deeply about his community and his family. He was a man who was rooted in place and

in commitments to those around him. These commitments were reflected in both his action and how he dealt with other people. He will be deeply missed by all who knew him.

Reflecting on John's life, I find it clear that he was an uncommon American citizen. He embodied the true meaning of citizenship that we all should embrace. He recognized what needed to be done to improve our society, and he actively engaged in the important work of citizenship at the local, state, and national levels of helping to build better communities. He leaves a great legacy and serves as a role model for us all.

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*Doug Henton is president and co-founder of Collaborative Economics.*

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**PETER KENNEY, CATHERINE MARINELLI, PAIGE HEYDON MCCRARY, MICHELE BAKER, WENDY PETERS MOSCHETTI, COLLEEN MURPHY, AND AMANDA LIMBAUGH**

So many have written eloquently about the impact John had on their lives as a convener, catalyst, mentor, teacher, advisor, and leader. We knew John in all of these capacities, but beyond this he was our trusted colleague and dear friend. As his coworkers at Civic Results, we have spent uncounted days with John by our side. We marvel at our great fortune to have worked alongside this incredible thinker with that astounding capacity to discover, connect, and disseminate information and ideas. He was the common link among so many individuals because he was able to bring disparate people together in ways that made each person in the room feel he or she was the most important.

John was a master at cultivating people, often going to great lengths to help people discover the best in themselves. John wanted to help people grow as much as he wanted ideas to grow. John was a mentor to us all, to his colleagues, to his family and everyone in his vast network. John never refused a request to sit down with a new graduate or young

student who wanted to explore options in public policy, or with a reporter curious to know how we achieved so many great things by working together. When someone commented on how much of his time he devoted to these "sage-like" activities, he just smiled and said "Hey man, it's karma."

But John wasn't all sage all the time; he had a very endearing human side. The John we knew was incurably messy. It was a running joke at Civic Results that his office was to be the origin of a future five-alarm fire. It was always difficult, sometimes impossible, to pick your way from the door to his desk because of the piles of paper that lay ten or fifteen inches deep on the floor—certain of these mounds dating back to the 1970s, towers of documents that had been transported intact from office to office, job to job. Amazingly, John was able to retrieve a specific document from this chaos at a moment's notice. Want something on the 1976 Olympics? "Just a minute." Need something on the partnership that emerged in the late 1980s to build Denver International Airport? "Hold on a sec, it's right here." While packing up John's office, we were reminded of how unique his mind really was. As we mined down through these stacks, an intricate web of connections between people and places, ideas and initiatives was revealed.

John was Type A without being aggressive, abrasive, or self-important. He was an insomniac and a workaholic, though he denied it. We each have scores of e-mails, photocopied articles, and Post-It-stuffed journals from John with notes like "This is really exciting!" or "What do you think about trying this?" It was hopeless trying to keep up with his suggested readings. There just weren't enough hours in the day to keep pace with John. We were challenged by him, inspired by him, and sometimes even intimidated by his energy. We have had the great privilege of daily association with John and though he no doubt knew we valued that, he downplayed it. If he ever caught a younger staffer saying that they worked "for John" he would quickly interject "tell them you work WITH me, not FOR me." For John, it was always about what we could do together.

A favorite office photo is one of John checking his e-mail in a small café in France. This tireless commitment to his work, even on vacation, affected his health. John had a prolonged battle with heart disease. But John always paid attention to his fitness. He was a fixture in the Saturday hot yoga class at the Denver Athletic Club. He rode his bike to work. He jogged regularly. He escaped to his cabin in the mountains with (gasp) poor cell reception and (double gasp) no Internet connection. And his wife, Sandy Widener, helped him. She planned long and exciting vacations to exotic destinations with a preference for places where there was no e-mail. She watched what he ate like a hawk. Though John's passion for "the work" sometimes seemed insatiable, he would drop it all in a moment to take Katy to get her tire fixed or to pick up Chase when she flew into town for the weekend. Where Sandy supplied the grounding that John needed, his girls gave him reason for believing that in this sometimes dark and crazy world there is always grace and beauty.

We will miss John's explosive laugh. We will miss the hearty greetings and hugs when we unexpectedly ran into him on a weekend and he treated us like long-lost friends. We will miss the weird leftovers that he brought in for office snacks as Sandy experimented with yet another organic, no-yeast, low-carb recipe. We will miss him, brilliant mind, cowboy boots, unicorn ties, dishes left in the sink, and all.

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