



Lessons Learned from Community Outreach Efforts for the Proposed Northside Greenway

A Case Study of Outreach Efforts in 2014 and 2015

In 2013, the City of Minneapolis Health Department (MHD) received funding through the Center for Prevention at Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota’s (Blue Cross) Active Living for All (ALfA) initiative to gather community input about building a greenway for pedestrians and bicyclists in North Minneapolis. Over the course of two summers, MHD and its partners contracted with local community-based organizations and residents (“community connectors”) to do outreach and gather feedback from residents about the greenway. MHD and its partners used resident feedback to determine whether there was enough community support to move forward with the proposed greenway and to identify community concerns that would need to be addressed if the greenway was implemented. Lead staff for the project were also committed to ensuring that no final decisions would be made without residents’ input.

The multiyear outreach efforts represented a new, more extensive outreach model than had been used by the City of Minneapolis in previous public infrastructure projects. This summary presents findings from an evaluation of the outreach campaign by drawing on reflections from key project stakeholders and highlighting promising practices, challenges, and lessons learned.

Project background

Initial discussions about a potential greenway in North Minneapolis began years before the city's outreach campaign began. The idea for the Northside greenway initially came from residents involved in Twin Cities Greenways, an all-volunteer nonprofit organization focused on greenway development. Early outreach efforts in 2011 by Twin Cities Greenways in partnership with Bike Walk Twin Cities (a campaign through Transit for Livable Communities to increase biking and walking) indicated that residents generally favored the greenway idea.¹

In 2012, the MHD became interested in the greenway project based on its potential to advance health equity in Minneapolis. In late 2012 and early 2013, MHD developed a multiphase outreach plan to gather input from residents to further shape the greenway concept. Funded by the Statewide Health Improvement Plan (SHIP), this work was guided by a steering committee made up of Northside residents and representatives from Twin Cities Greenways, City of Minneapolis Public Works (Public Works), Minneapolis Parks and Recreation, and several other partners. In late 2012, this team led a community input process (including an online survey, open house, and community events), which helped define the route and showed residents preferred a full linear park greenway over two other design options (a half and half design or a bicycle boulevard).²

In early 2013, MHD collected additional feedback from residents through a second online survey, another open house, and a series of neighborhood meetings. Of the 371 respondents who completed the online survey, 70 percent lived in North Minneapolis (an increase from 53% the previous year) and 29 percent lived on the proposed route (compared with 18% in 2012). A total of 74 percent of respondents supported the proposed route, and 73 percent supported the design options of a full linear greenway or a half and half option. Fewer respondents who lived on the route supported the route and design options (60% supported the route and 62% supported the design options).³ Although the 2013 outreach efforts were more successful in engaging Northside residents, it is not clear how well the survey respondents reflected the makeup of the community, as demographic information was not collected.

¹ Of 171 residents surveyed, 89 percent agreed that “the greenway concept could be an asset to my community” and 73 percent “would be happy to have a greenway street in front of my house.” Three-quarter of respondents (76%) were people of color.

² Of the 366 people who completed the online survey, 53 percent lived in North Minneapolis and 18 percent lived along the proposed route. Half of the respondents (51%) preferred a route running along Humboldt and Irving Avenues between Victory Memorial Parkway and Plymouth Avenue, including the 25 people who responded to the survey and lived along the route. A majority of respondents (72%) preferred the full linear park greenway design over the other two options. For a full report of findings, see <http://www.minneapolismn.gov/www/groups/public/@health/documents/webcontent/wcms1p-144919.pdf>

³ Input was not gathered about each design option individually. For a full report of findings, see <http://www.minneapolismn.gov/www/groups/public/@health/documents/webcontent/wcms1p-144921.pdf>

In 2013, MHD and Public Works received funding from Blue Cross to explore the technical feasibility of the project and build a more extensive outreach campaign that would address some of the limitations of previous efforts. The Alliance for Metropolitan Stability (AMS), a nonprofit coalition whose mission is to advance racial, economic, and environmental justice in growth and development patterns in the Twin Cities, was also brought on to support the outreach campaign based on its past experience in community organizing around transit-related issues. In October 2014, the key partners also convened a Greenway Outreach Steering Committee (“the Steering Committee”), made up of residents and representatives of partner organizations to support and guide the outreach efforts. These three partners and the Steering Committee (collectively referred to as “key partners” in this summary) have been responsible for the greenway planning efforts since 2014.

The 2014 outreach efforts

In 2014, MHD and AMS worked with the Steering Committee to coordinate a larger outreach process to capture more data about levels of support for the greenway and address some of the limitations of previous outreach efforts. The key partners contracted with thirteen community-based organizations to administer a survey, build awareness about the greenway concept, and use creative strategies to gather resident input about the proposed greenway. These organizations were selected by a committee of Northside residents, organizational partners, and Steering Committee representatives. The following lessons learned from the 2014 outreach efforts helped shape the proposed greenway design and future outreach efforts.

Effective outreach partners were organizations in North Minneapolis that had connections and credibility with community residents. The key partners reflected that organizations based in North Minneapolis seemed to be especially effective in their outreach efforts. These organizations were able to build on existing connections, including their relationships with cultural leaders within the community. The key partners felt these organizations were more effective in their outreach efforts than the culturally specific organizations that worked with North Minneapolis residents, but were located outside of the area.

Using multiple strategies to reach residents helped the key partners hear from a more representative and culturally diverse group of North Minneapolis residents. The survey was administered online, at community events (such as group bike rides, Open Streets events, picnics, barbecues, and church and community garden events), and by door-knocking at homes along the greenway. The majority of Asian or Pacific Islander (94%), African American (92%), Hispanic/Latino (89%), and American Indian (73%) residents who completed the survey were reached through the organizations’ door knocking and outreach at specific events. If only the online survey had been used, feedback would have come from a predominately white group of residents (75% of white respondents completed the survey online, compared to 10% of residents of color). In addition,

the sub-contracted organizations felt that door-knocking helped them hear from a more representative group of community members, particularly renters.

In addition to the outreach activities, the sub-contracted organizations also described informal strategies that worked well in engaging residents in discussions about the greenway. These strategies included: providing context about the history of the project; offering maps, photos, or tours of other greenways and bike lanes to provide residents with a visual idea of the greenway; making participation in the input process easy and providing simple, straightforward information; meeting people where they were; engaging residents in outreach efforts as volunteers or participants; partnering with other organizations; acknowledging concerns that people had about the greenway; and providing opportunities for residents to gather and have fun. Overall, the sub-contracted organizations observed that community residents were interested in providing input and sharing suggestions, but also noted some residents were disillusioned by past efforts in their community where input was either not taken into consideration or gathered, and not used in making decisions.

Although outreach activities reached a more culturally diverse cross-section of residents than earlier efforts, the results showed a need for more outreach with Hmong and African American residents. Although the 2014 survey was completed by a culturally diverse group of respondents, African American residents were underrepresented in the survey sample (African American residents comprise 48% of the North Minneapolis population, but only 29% of North Minneapolis survey respondents). Some organizations also said that using the online survey contributed to overrepresentation of white residents, particularly those who live outside of North Minneapolis.

Some organizations also felt that continued efforts were needed to reach residents living on the route to hear more about their concerns, particularly Hmong-speaking residents who were less supportive of the greenway project (61% of Hmong residents living on the proposed route opposed the greenway, compared to 24% of all respondents living on the route). Additionally, sub-contracted organizations reported that some cultures do not feel as comfortable responding to surveys and that storytelling and conversation might be more effective ways to engage with these groups.

The survey results showed a majority of residents supported the greenway concept, but more information was needed to better understand residents' opinions about the project. The surveying efforts provided baseline information about residents' levels of support for the greenway. Seventy percent of North Minneapolis respondents supported the greenway concept (48% "strongly supported" and 22% "supported" the idea), and about two-thirds of those living on the route (62%) were in favor of it. Three-quarters of all respondents (76%) supported the greenway idea. At the same time, the key partners acknowledged the need for more information to understand residents' interests and concerns about the project.

The 2015 outreach efforts

The key partners drew from lessons learned in 2014 to make some key changes to expand and deepen their 2015 outreach efforts. They prioritized outreach with residents who had not been reached by earlier efforts, gathered qualitative information to better understand residents' questions, concerns, and desires for the greenway, and began outreach efforts south of Plymouth Avenue to explore support for extending the proposed greenway into this area, based on interest from neighborhood organizations in the area and resident feedback from the 2014 survey.

To expand their outreach efforts, the key partners sub-contracted with a larger group of 17 local organizations, eight of whom had participated in the outreach process in 2014, to gather feedback from community residents. They also piloted a “community connectors” program that trained and supported six community residents to do targeted outreach with populations who had been less represented in previous outreach efforts (African American and Asian residents, as well as people with disabilities, renters, and transit riders).

Leadership for the project also began to transition to a more formal coalition of residents and organizations. In late 2014, the Northside Greenway Council (NGC), formerly the Steering Committee, adopted by-laws and elected chairs with the goal of ultimately shifting leadership for the project to the council.

As they reflected on their work, the key partners identified a number of key lessons that can inform their ongoing work.

Targeted outreach, using a range of strategies, was critical for hearing from the diverse population of residents who live in North Minneapolis. By increasing the number of sub-contracted organizations and establishing the community connector program, the outreach process continued to reach residents not engaged through earlier outreach activities. Much of the outreach done in 2015 took place at community events or through creative strategies such as zines or podcasts. Some outreach was also done in more traditional ways, such as by attending community meetings or holding community conversations or focus groups. Door-knocking was used less frequently in 2015. This is due, at least in part, to the type of information they were trying to gather from residents. Some of the outreach partners found that door-knocking did not help them build the rapport needed for residents to feel comfortable taking part in a longer and more in-depth discussion of the greenway. One community connector acknowledged that in the 2015 efforts, relationship building was just as important as data collection.

The outreach partners continued to identify some communities who they were less successful at reaching. Most of the sub-contracted organizations felt they had reached the residents they set out to, but some still felt that the 2015 outreach efforts did not reach all of the key populations whose input should be heard, including Latino and Somali residents and residents in specific apartment buildings and facilities for older adults. The outreach partners' overall success in reaching residents who reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of the neighborhood will be better understood after the city completes its analysis of the data collected.

Through the 2015 outreach strategies, the key partners were able to hear more about residents' specific concerns about the greenway, especially around public safety, cost, and gentrification. Although most residents acknowledged benefits the greenway might bring to the community, residents brought up concerns about the cost of the project, unwanted assessments, impacts on property values and parking, and public safety and patrol of the greenway. Residents also expressed concerns about gentrification and ensuring that residents in North Minneapolis benefit from any economic development the greenway may create. Potential short-term concerns around safety and long-term concerns such as gentrification and economic development can be difficult to estimate, but the key partners plan to pay particular attention to these issues as they launch the demonstration project and evaluate its impact.

The sub-contracted organizations also suggested multiple strategies to share results from these outreach efforts and other information about the greenway with residents. These included another round of outreach similar to the 2014 and 2015 efforts, community meetings and events, newsletters, flyers, and email updates to neighborhood groups, and broader partnerships with local organizations. The key partners have made plans to continue outreach efforts in the next phases of the project.

By the end of 2015, the key partners felt there was enough evidence of support for the proposed greenway to test the concept over the course of a year with a demonstration project. The key partners plan to continue engaging residents throughout the process through another round of work with sub-contracted organizations and community connectors. In addition, they plan to study potential unintended impacts of the greenway that residents were concerned about and develop a greenway design that reflects the multiple ways residents were interested in using the space, including for bicycling, walking, and gathering.

Decision-making about the greenway

Some stakeholders have suggested that while the outreach campaign has reached a broad cross-section of residents, residents could have had a stronger voice in shaping the project early on. Key partners may have missed opportunities to engage residents in a discussion from the beginning about projects that would contribute to a healthier community. This starting point for the project may contribute to a disconnect between the key partners' guiding principle to have community input inform all decisions and public perceptions of the process. Some partners also found it difficult to do community outreach without advocating for the greenway. In addition, the key partners have grappled with how to determine when enough people had been reached and whether there was enough evidence of support for the greenway to move forward with the project.

The key partners defined their role as facilitating community input rather than advocating for the greenway, but also acknowledged the difficulty of maintaining a neutral stance.

Through the end of the 2015 efforts, the key partners reinforced this message through communications, emphasizing that no decisions had been made yet. The bylaws for the NGC, developed in late 2014 and adopted in May 2015, were also intended to provide guidance about the role of the body, focused on outreach and engagement more than advocacy. However, key partners acknowledged that some members of the NGC have struggled to maintain this stance, as many have been involved with the project from the beginning, often in multiple ways, and are invested in seeing it built. The NGC has had internal dialogues to define its organizational stance more clearly, and in at least one case, an NGC member stepped down because they felt that they could not adhere to membership guidelines about advocacy.

This lack of role clarity has contributed to a perception among some residents that the process is not driven by community input. The NGC has struggled with public perception that they are an advocacy group, but has tried to counter that perception with residents who have attended the meetings. Although the key partners have tried to be clear in their messaging that no final decisions have been made, they acknowledged that community members may have a different perception of the process. They suggested that this disconnect may stem from multiple factors including historical disenfranchisement and a need for clearer communication about the history and guiding principles of the project.

The key partners have worked to include avenues for different perspectives to be included, but have faced challenges in figuring out how to engage with residents who oppose the greenway. All outreach activities were intended to gather feedback from all residents, including residents who had concerns about the greenway concept. The NGC also invited public participation in its monthly meetings to hear feedback from residents. The key partners all noted that they invited residents who were interested in a constructive dialogue about their concerns, but struggled with how to respond to residents who they perceived as obstructing the process. The project has also

struggled with its social media presence. Individual members of the NGC have replied to posts on a Facebook site set up to oppose the greenway, leading to some contentious discussions with residents. Several project representatives have noted the need for more clarity on communication so it is clear when statements made by individuals represent the shared views of all key partners involved in the project.

Throughout the project, the key partners engaged in continuing dialogue about whether enough residents had been heard from and whether there was enough evidence of community support to move forward with the project. The NGC has revisited this question regularly. Some members felt that the project was moving too slowly, especially given the longer timelines needed to secure funding and implement capital projects, and others felt that additional outreach was needed to ensure the project represented the interests of the community. Many of the project representatives referenced the 2014 survey results showing fairly strong support for the greenway as a turning point in increasing the key partners' confidence that the greenway had community support.

As planning for the demonstration project began, there was broader consensus among the key partners that there was enough evidence of support for the project to shift their role from neutral outreach to advocacy for the greenway concept.

Moving forward

The greenway project has faced several key transitions as it has moved into 2016. In June, a five-block demonstration project was launched along a stretch of the proposed route, which will allow for ongoing outreach and a more robust evaluation process that will answer many of the feasibility questions. The installation of the demonstration project has also led to increased opposition to the greenway. The key partners continue to wrestle with how to respond to this opposition and weigh it alongside considerable positive feedback from residents.

The project is also beginning to transition its leadership. The NGC is moving toward becoming an independent and financially sustainable body separate from MHD, and AMS is stepping back so that the NGC and other community leaders can take on greater ownership of the project. This transition is intended to allow for more sustainable monitoring of the greenway and to take on an advocacy role. The remaining partners will continue to gather feedback from residents, especially from those living along the proposed route, and implement a robust evaluation of the demonstration project. This work will continue to be guided by a focus on hearing residents' voices more than advocating for the project.

Recommendations for implementing a strong outreach process in public projects

The outreach efforts in 2014 and 2015 led to input from a much more culturally diverse group of residents than the online survey alone, which provides strong evidence for the importance of investing in targeted, community-based outreach. The key partners also described the strengthened capacity that has resulted from working across sectors. Although the project is still evolving, the early efforts offer a number of promising practices for city officials and other stakeholders interested in building a more robust outreach process into public projects. These include:

- Ensure adequate funding is in place to support robust outreach and engagement activities that include reporting results back to community residents.
- Work to maintain flexible timelines so that residents' responses drive actions and decisions.
- Establish an advisory committee that includes residents and local organizations to help guide the outreach process.
- Offer multiple ways for residents to provide input, using both traditional and non-traditional methods (e.g., door-knocking, providing time at advisory council meetings for public input, offering an online survey, or organizing community events or special projects that foster public conversation and input).
- Explore opportunities to contract with local organizations on outreach efforts, especially cultural and community-based organizations that have strong credibility and close connections with the communities they serve.
- When contracting with organizations to do outreach, ask what type of support they need to do the work, provide clear expectations, and encourage outreach partners to be creative and use the outreach strategies that they have found to be effective in reaching residents.
- Provide opportunities for outreach partners to coordinate efforts and work together.
- Carefully consider who is reached and who is missed by any type of proposed data collection activity. Make a commitment to invest in data gathering approaches that ensure communities of color and cultural groups are well represented and that data can be disaggregated by race and ethnicity.
- Develop ways to measure and track feedback from residents and to describe who is being reached, and provide clear and thorough documentation about the process of gathering feedback.
- Create a communications plan early on that can reach as many residents and stakeholder groups as possible to build awareness about the proposed project and to share information and decisions about the project with transparency.
- Establish guidelines about how decisions will be made, including how residents' voices will be included in that process, and provide clear information to residents about the decision-making process through a variety of channels.

Recommendations for the key partners of the proposed Northside greenway

In addition, the following recommendations may help the key partners build on accomplishments and address ongoing challenges as the greenway demonstration project is implemented.

- **Continue to seek feedback and share results with transparency.** As the project continues to evolve, consider how new feedback, especially criticisms or concerns about the project, should be used along with earlier input to refine the greenway concept. Focus future efforts on hearing from residents most directly impacted (i.e., residents who are most likely to benefit or be burdened by the greenway). Continue to document all outreach activities and make findings available to the public in a timely manner and through multiple channels. Gather input from local stakeholders about ways to communicate information to residents and consider ways to involve local organizations in reporting information about the outreach process and key findings back to residents.
- **Design the demonstration project evaluation with residents' interests in mind.** Implement a strong evaluation of the demonstration project that will examine issues of greatest concern to community residents, such as cost, public safety, gentrification, and economic development. Look for opportunities to share residents' concerns and other evaluation results with other city departments or sectors that are responsible for addressing identified needs that fall beyond the scope of the greenway project.
- **Plan early to communicate effectively with residents.** Develop a communications plan focused on making the decision-making process more transparent and establish clear messaging guidance among key partners. Explore ways to leverage the partnerships that have already been established to more clearly communicate with residents about the decision-making process moving forward.
- **Clarify roles and responsibilities of key partners.** Establish clear definitions of the role that each key partner will play in the project moving forward, especially in ensuring that residents' voices are included in the process and advocating for the greenway. Be transparent about the decision-making processes and the information used to inform the decisions.

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For more information

This summary presents highlights of the *Outreach for the Proposed Northside Greenway*. For more information about this report, contact Amanda Hane at Wilder Research, 651-280-2661.

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