

LISC-BSC Partner Meeting Themes Summary

Blake Road Corridor Collaborative

Background

Wilder Research was hired by LISC to evaluate the overall Building Sustainable Communities program. In order to develop an evaluation plan that accurately reflects the context, needs, and goals of the different partner organizations funded through this program, Wilder Research met individually with each partner organization to learn more about their organization's work, evaluation goals, and community context.

This is a summary of the main themes from three meetings held by Wilder Research staff with the Blake Road Corridor Collaborative (BRCC). The first meeting was with community partners on Nov. 18th, 2013. In attendance were representatives of a variety of organizations and agencies that are partners in the BRCC, including the local police, nonprofits, businesses, public schools, faith leaders, and city officials. The final focus groups were held on September 8, 2014 with 9 organizational partners, and on October 8, 2014 with 4 community residents.

This summary is meant to be an overview of the discussions and a supplement to the full meeting notes (attached). It is also intended to serve as a feedback loop between Wilder Research and the partner organizations, ensuring that we accurately captured and interpreted the things said during our meetings. Once agreed to, it will also help to inform LISC staff.

Initial meeting

Community conditions

During our discussion with the BRCC staff and representatives of its partner organizations/agencies, they described the Blake Road Corridor area in Hopkins in a way that made this particular area seem like a community within a community. The Blake Road corridor has the largest population of communities of color, with almost 40 different languages spoken. It also has more low-income residents in this particular

neighborhood than in the rest of the city of Hopkins. As a result, there has often been misunderstanding and miscommunication with local decision makers and this community, which has resulted in the voices of the community often not being heard and thus not empowered to effect change in the community.

Prior to the BRCC, they described there being many organizations and agencies working more or less in siloes and not communicating across sectors and organizations/agencies. As a result, each group focused on its particular service areas, but was not adequately able to address the pressing needs of these community members due to a lack of cross-sector coordination and collaboration. This was brought to the forefront when the initial stakeholders—that would go on to form the BRCC—came together due to a concern about crime trends and a need for increased positive activities for youth in the neighborhood. It was largely in response to this need that the BRCC was formed. Later on, planning efforts for the Southwest light rail line and the planned station in the neighborhood further highlighted the need for ongoing collaboration.

Activities and strategies

At the very core of the BRCC's work is cross-sector and cross-organization collaboration, coordination, and communication. The partners at the discussion described how the BRCC grew out of a few key partnerships with the neighborhood school, the police, and local human service organizations that then built relationships with other organizations, community leaders, agencies, and businesses in the area that were able to contribute certain resources and expertise to addressing these issues in the community. They also described how easily the partners are now able to communicate with one another about what is needed to get things done, and how everyone works together and is responsive. This high level of cross-sector collaboration has developed out of the relationship building between these partners over the last few years.

Beyond building strong collaborative relationships between the various partners, the work of the BRCC has been effective at building strong relationships with the community members. This has been done in a variety of manners, such as door-to-door meetings, community events (i.e. community garden), youth programming, and trainings. They have focused on bringing the community voices to the table, holding public forums and listening sessions, which has empowered the community members to have an avenue for being involved in local decision making that impacts their community. Because of their cross-sector collaboration, the BRCC partners are able to be responsive to the community's needs and goals by connecting to whatever partner has the resources that are most effective and applicable to said needs.

The direct services that the BRCC and its partners work together to provide include youth afterschool programming and academic support, affordable housing planning, joint development planning around the Southwest light rail developments, crime reduction, park planning, community gardens, and community events. In addition, they also provide entrepreneurship training, and work to connect community members to local decision making tables and other related committees. This diverse partnership enables the BRCC to take a holistic approach to improving the community, building social, political, natural, and built capital in the community.

Learnings to date

According to the BRCC and its partners, the most important lessons they have learned to date have been that all organizational partners are important and essential to the work, each providing their own areas of expertise and resources that are necessary to improving the community. In order to do this effectively, clear communication channels and relationship building have been essential, especially through the role of the BRCC coordinator in connecting the different partners with the needs of the community and vice versa.

They also described how each partner has learned how critical community engagement is for their work. They said their work is driven by the wants and needs of the community, and only by creating a variety of regular community engagement approaches (i.e. door-to-door visits, community listening sessions, etc.) are they able to effectively know and respond to the community in that regard. In building trust with the community members,

they are able to not only hear the voices of the community, but get them actively involved in the different activities impacting the quality of life in the community.

Finally, they said that they learned the value of collaboration for each individual organization/agency inasmuch as it provides them with greater access to the community and information on how to most effectively steer their own resources and activities to meet the needs of the community. This was especially expressed by city officials who said they now have greater civic participation at community meetings and events than they ever had previously. This cross-sector collaboration has also been an important platform for attracting more resources from funders.

Evaluation hopes and fears

The BRCC and its partners said that they hope the overall evaluation of the Building Sustainable Communities' program will provide them with better ways to tell the story of what they are doing in the community and how effective cross-sector collaboration can be used for meeting community members' needs while empowering the community. They hope it will not only highlight the success of their model, but also point out where they may be missing the mark so that they can continually improve their model. From there, they also hope they will then be able to make the case to investors/funders about how effective and impactful their collaborative approach is in their community. At the larger BSC level, they hope to learn more about what others are doing effectively, thus facilitating cross-organizational learning.

They did not express many fears, except knowing that evaluation takes time and resources, and often each partner is stretched to capacity in their work with limited resources.

Summary of final focus groups with residents and partner organizations

Strategies for engagement

When asked how community member focus group participants originally became involved with the Blake Road Corridor Collaborative (BRCC), most cited being invited to community events or listening sessions, finding activities for youth in the community through BRCC, and other means of communication from Ann, such as fliers, emails, phone calls, door knocking, etc. These residents

described that because of the relationships that they have built with other residents, organizations, and officials they are inspired to continue to be involved with BRCC and stay informed about their community. They also report that the variety of opportunities and activities made available to them by BRCC continue to keep them, their families, and their neighbors engaged in BRCC's community work.

Mentioning activities such as the community garden, bicycle path and sidewalk planning, community events (i.e. barbecues in the park), and activities for youth as topics which BRCC focuses on for its work, residents described how they feel these activities and relationships make their community safer and that residents are empowered to have their voices and ideas heard and translated into action by BRCC.

Residents described how Ann and the BRCC has built trust with them by proactively seeking out and listening to the voices, ideas, concerns, needs, and priorities of residents, empowering their voices to be heard and recognizing the expertise of each individual resident. This mutual sharing and visioning process between Ann and residents helps foster an environment that encourages residents to be engaged in the different things happening in their community: "We always come and share our ideas and how we feel about them. And disagreements, we will share what we are thinking on the topic we're talking about. That's the way we share ideas." By being asked for their suggestions and ideas, residents feel empowered and know that their voices matter. This was particularly highlighted with regard to park planning and the Southwest light rail station planning, which one community member described by saying:

When they were doing the construction and asking suggestions from us, I was really surprised. I wasn't really sure - I was asking Ann, "Am I supposed to give suggestions? It's big construction and I don't know what's going on. ... Do they really want to ask?" I'm not the person to answer - I don't know where this road has to go. Ann was like, "No, you people live in this community. You should have this position." Ann says your voice matters and it really got into consideration and now I really believe I have a part of this and now I can say what I feel. Like my comfort level - if I don't want a road here I could definitely say I don't want it. I could say I want a bike path - It's totally different and got me surprised. They value the opinion of the people and that really matters.

This commitment to resident engagement was supported by partner organization representatives, who described Ann's engagement work with residents as being the most critical aspect to the effectiveness of their collaborative work, ensuring that the right voices are at the table and that residents and organizations are mutually informed about what is going on in the community. This helps to identify needs, opportunities, and potential resources for the organizations participating in the collaborative to then coordinate and work together to address the common goal of improving the community.

Relationship building

Because of its nature as a collaborative, the BRCC focuses much of its efforts on relationship building amongst the organizational partners and other potential partners, ranging across a variety of organizations and fields, such as the local public school system, local nonprofits, local businesses, elected officials, public/city planners, housing developers, community organizers, residents and associations, local religious institutions, the parks and recreation department, and the police. This diverse array of perspectives and resources brings what partner organizations described as innovative ideas in a collaborative environment where mutual trust enables the collaborative partners to be willing to take risks and try new ways of doing things, and a willingness to be reflexive and learn from any mistakes or failures along the way. As one partner organization described the interconnectedness and collaborative nature of the BRCC's work: "Anything we do comes as partners. You don't do it in isolation because all of us had a role in making it happen... It won't work in isolation."

Impacts

Because of the variety of stakeholders involved in the BRCC, they are able to have broad and far-reaching impacts which are more coordinated and effective as a result of the partnerships and their relationships with residents. The BRCC was described as helping facilitate information sharing across stakeholders, identify opportunities and resources, help one another through challenges, learn from each other, facilitate resident engagement, and make the work of each individual partner organization more equitable and community-driven.

Partner organization representatives described how the collaborative is a unique model for doing community-building work in a suburban context, allowing each partner to learn from one another, take risks, and yet always have the “bigger picture” of the community and its residents in mind throughout. One way of accomplishing this active, ongoing engagement of residents is through monthly meetings that Ann hosts with community members. Everyone is invited and welcome to join as they discuss any ideas, concerns, needs, or priorities of the residents, and foster a safe space for them to keep up to date on community events and learn about the various cultural/ethnic backgrounds of the residents who attend. In the words of one resident,

When you come to the meetings, you know other people, other cultures, and that's great. Sometimes people from other countries, they do things separately. Where it's good in this community is we always have people from other cultures. Like what they do on Hopkins Main Street, they do presentations for different cultures at night so that's pretty good stuff they're doing.

The BRCC was credited by both organization partners and residents as helping improve police relations with the community, improve the safety of the community, provide access to more affordable housing and nice public parks, foster community connectedness and sense of ownership and empowerment for residents in their community, improve relations between the schools and families, facilitate more opportunities and activities for youth, and help bring about a more informed and stronger community overall. Ultimately, the BRCC's work is grounded in relationship building, with organization partners and with residents, for the goal of improving the community for its residents. As one organizational partner summarized:

[Early in our work we realized] that we really need to be working with residents to really understand how this community can find and build on opportunities. It's been a slow process of relationship building and creating a sense of community. But that work has really evolved due to the talents and skills of organizing on the ground. I imagine this community could never have gotten to this point without systematic support of relationship building. Everything was so fragmented and isolated. I don't know how it would've been bridged. Those initial steps of building this community connectivity will ultimately create a lot. For the city's benefit, with the investment of the transit and how this place can be transformative, I'm hopeful we'll be able to continue listening to the residents and hoping this connectivity with partners will continue to honor and hold up the community.

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For more information

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