



Community engagement in the Twin Cities

Summary of 2013 interim report on strategies, impact, and potential sustainability

After two years of the Corridors of Opportunity (CoO) initiative, and one full year of its community engagement grant-funded work, interim evaluation findings are:

- Participating community members report significant gains in knowledge, awareness, leadership skills, and involvement.
- Grantee organizations have gained visibility, capacity to organize, technical knowledge about new issues, and stronger relationships with public agencies.
- Grantees' public agency counterparts report slightly more favorable attitudes toward engagement and better awareness of communities' needs and priorities.
- At the regional level, some influential non-partner agencies have observed the new community engagement model in practice, found it to be compelling, and adopted elements of it themselves; and the McKnight Foundation has signaled its confidence in the model by making a third year of grant funding available for the year following the end of the CoO.

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Background

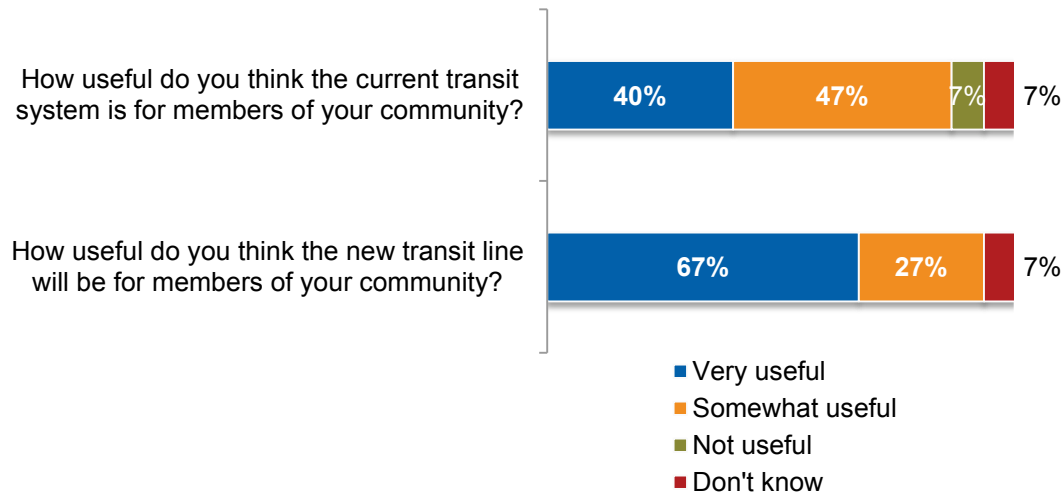
In the fall of 2010, the Minneapolis-St. Paul region received two major grants to integrate different sectors of planning (including transportation, housing, land use, and others) across multiple jurisdictions in order to advance regional economic competitiveness. This work has focused on developing the regional transit system while also striving for equity in the impacts of that development. \$750,000 of that funding was dedicated to community engagement of historically under-represented populations, under the guidance of a Community Engagement Team (CET) made up of three local organizations with strong relationships with community-based organizations (CBOs). Through a community-driven process, the funding was re-allocated in two rounds of sub-grants to 19 grassroots organizations. First-round grants ranged from \$30,000 to \$60,000, with an average size of just under \$40,000. Engagement work for the CoO also included significant support and leadership activities on the part of a Community Engagement Steering Committee initiated by the CET and made up of interested leaders from a diverse array of CBOs.

This summary highlights key findings and issues to consider contained in “Community engagement in the Twin Cities: Interim report on strategies, impact, and potential sustainability.” It covers the first two of the three years of the Corridors of Opportunity (CoO) initiative, and the first of the two rounds of community engagement (CE) sub-grants. It is based on reports and interviews with grantee organization leaders and participants, public agency staff who worked with grantee organizations, and high-level staff in a variety of area organizations whose perspectives include the overall field of community engagement in the region. The evaluation focused on the four key research questions below.

To what extent have community members changed their perceptions of the potential threats and/or benefits represented by transit and its related development? Do they feel that plans reflect community needs and values?

As a result of CE grant activities, participants report significantly more positive community perceptions about transit and its related development. Moreover, compared to their perceptions before the grants, two-thirds of participants are now more likely to believe that the new transit lines are being planned with their communities’ needs in mind. These perceptions are important because they are likely to contribute to continued involvement over time.

1. Participants' perceptions of transit after a year of grant-funded activity (N=15)



These views are supported by the responses of public agency counterparts, who believe that they are now better aware of community needs and perspectives and better able to represent those in their planning decisions.

What evidence is there that the intended results are occurring? Is there evidence that these are different than under the models in previous use?

One intended result is that transit and transit-oriented development (TOD) **planning agencies will do their work differently**, to more fully include the views of historically under-represented communities. Findings from a single year of sub-grant activity are inconclusive. Most public agency counterparts report that they have expanded their efforts to engage communities, and have changed at least some aspect of their decisions and/or decision-making processes. However, none report that these changes have been institutionalized, for example, in new positions or funding, or through formally adopted policies on outreach or advisory committee roles.

Most grantees say they are seeing more openness and stronger relationships in their dealings with public agencies, and that the public agencies they are working with are more actively listening to the needs of community members. However, the community observers, who see the full regional landscape rather than the individual grant activities, do not yet report seeing significant shifts in public practices – that is, most agencies in the region are seen as making only modest changes to adopt the practices associated with the new model that are different (see next section).

2. Extent of change in public agency engagement strategies

	Agency representatives: How much has your agency changed how they involve members of the community? (N=9)	Community observers: How much have public agencies changed how they involve members of the community? (N=17)
Significant changes	5	2
Modest changes	4	12
No changes	-	-
Missing / Don't know	0	3

Another intended result is that **community-based organizations and residents will become more proactively engaged** with government entities, and do so in cooperative rather than confrontational ways. Stakeholders all agree that the grants have fostered this change, and both grantee leads and community participants report that this increased engagement will continue after the grant period is over. To the extent that the engagement has beneficial results for communities, this has the potential to become self-sustaining if the resources are available to continue to fund the organizing work.

This leads to the final, and most important, intended outcome: **Planning decisions that are more beneficial** for low-income and other historically under-represented groups as a result of this CE model. At this time, most planning decisions on which grant activities were focused were still under discussion. However, as stated already, both CBOs and public agency representatives felt that those discussions were being based on a better understanding of the issues of most importance to community members. This is an important first step toward eventual positive benefits for communities. One particularly notable example of likely benefits is the re-consideration of a station location in order to better serve a suburban immigrant community whose perspectives were previously relatively unknown to the city in which they lived. Another example is seen in focus group or interview comments from two different developers that community input has resulted in their plans for specific sites or station areas being more in tune with what the community is asking for.

What is the CET's model of engagement, and how is it similar to or different from previous work in the region?

The model is based on a consistent set of principles that can be applied at multiple levels and in a variety of contexts. As observed by the evaluators, these principles are:

- Build relationships and trust through time, transparency, and accountability
- Work at more than one level (for example, both individual organizations - grassroots, intermediaries, and public agencies – and connections among organizations including funders; also, both individual communities and the overall Twin Cities region)
- Seek and apply new learning to strengthen the model (collect and use feedback to re-shape the work for continuous adaptation and strengthening)
- Respect and promote the “democratization of expertise” and build community capacity to exercise it (for example, recognize that grassroots community members are the experts on community needs and priorities and what is most needed for quality of life)
- Model good engagement and teach the approach while doing the work
- Work in partnership with the public sector
- Keep in mind the goal of lasting systems change to promote equity
- Seek, deploy, and coordinate needed resources

The model is similar to previous community engagement in its purpose of helping to bring grassroots perspectives into public sector decision-making on issues that affect their communities. The main elements that are distinctive are:

- Regional level work to coordinate many separate efforts through a common approach and focus. This included strategic work to re-shape expectations and provide a new set of shared experiences to support a new framework for dialog about equity and equitable development. This preliminary work drew together diverse partners, including public agency and philanthropic staff along with community members, to prepare for the PolicyLink 2011 Equity Summit, attend it together, and debrief afterwards to create action plans together. This shared work helped “prepare the field” to be more fertile for grantees’ efforts and new public agency practices.
- Provision of individualized and group technical and strategic advice to public agencies as well as community organizations, to teach this model of engagement, help facilitate new connections between community-based organizations and public agency

representatives, and educate each group (community members and public sector) about the processes that are essential to the other.

- Intentional efforts on the part of the CET leadership to “model the model” of authentic engagement at all times. Among other examples, this meant that in all their actions, including the development of the initial CE work plan, they sought guidance from grassroots perspectives and community input into the design of processes as well as information materials. In this way they demonstrated the “democratization of expertise” that recognizes that community members are the true experts on their own needs and perspectives.

What does it take to implement this model? What different capacities are needed?

The new CE model requires resources beyond those ordinarily available to grassroots organizations, for additional outreach, community education about some highly technical issues such as transportation and land use planning, collection of input from community members about their perspectives, organization of meetings with public officials, and in some cases more formal leadership development activities. The more intensive, focused, and technical nature of this work also requires support for the CBOs from intermediary organizations, with adequate additional funding to allow them to add the needed coordination and technical assistance to their regular activities.

Besides funding for this added capacity, the model requires new skills and understanding on the part of community and public agency representatives. It obliges both CBOs and public agencies to acknowledge any prior mistrust and be open to cooperation. This may be difficult where previous history has included conflict or confrontation. However, the intermediary organizations have helped to facilitate new beginnings based on common goals within the CoO’s overall framework of equity. This was supported by the development and adoption of explicit language for the shared principle of equitable development, as well as a specific operational definition of the term, developed by the CE Steering Committee.

Another finding is the importance for both CBOs and public agencies to increase their understanding of each other’s ways of working. For CBOs, this means helping community members to learn the many different steps involved in planning for transportation and related land uses. For agencies, it involves recognizing that community representatives usually cannot commit the overall community to agreement on a new idea or proposal when it is first raised at a meeting, but need time to take the idea back to share and discuss with community members before a decision can be made.

The model requires relationship building. Where grant activities were most successful, we found that they included an on-going relationship between the CBO and the public agency, with regular and two-way communication between them. This helps ensure that both parties can keep their stakeholders up to date, and helps avoid the perception that either one alone is controlling the process. The need to build CBO capacity also requires building relationships between the CET and CE Steering Committee and the CBOs.

At another level of partnership, the fact that all of the different grants and other CE efforts were coordinated through the CoO added to the effectiveness of each. The shared framework of the initiative’s goals and principles helped the CBOs as well as the larger CE Steering Committee and the CETs to support and learn from each other. The common framework similarly facilitated more shared learning among public agencies than if the efforts had been made independently of each other.

Finally, the model requires time. Most public agency representatives report this model of engagement takes more time than the traditional model. However, some advocates among the community observers point out that the public planning process on topics such as transit take so many years anyway that no additional time is required for engagement, provided it is started early enough. Several public agency staff also report that a bit more time up front to assure that communities are fully represented in decision-making can save time later when community members who were left out of the process sometimes hold up decisions to ask for re-consideration.

3. Public agency staff members’ perceptions of community engagement, reported by agency representatives after a year of working with CE grantees (N=8)

	Yes, very much	Yes, somewhat	Not at all	Varies too widely; No consensus or majority view
Do you think most of your colleagues in your agency believe that community engagement <u>slows your process down</u> ?	1	4	2	1
<u>Before the grants were awarded</u> , would you have said that most of your colleagues in your agency believed that community engagement would slow your process down?	2	3	3	-
Do you think most of your colleagues in your agency believe that community engagement improves the quality of your agency’s planning?	6	2	-	-
<u>Before the grants were awarded</u> , would you have said that most of your colleagues in your agency believed that community engagement would improve the quality of your agency’s planning?	5	3	-	-

Issues to consider

Preliminary findings show an initial shift toward the new model of engagement, especially (but not only) where specific projects were supported by CE grants. Findings also show a generally positive response to the new model from public agency counterparts of grantees, and a perception among community observers that there is a modest shift of practices toward the new model. There has been a strongly positive response from leaders of community organizations that received grants and their constituent members in their communities.

The major challenges to the work so far include:

- Limits to funding and organizational capacity (especially by new and/or small community organizations)
- The technical complexity of many of the issues being addressed
- For some CBOs, difficulty in sustaining community members' interest and energy over the long period over which transit and related planning decisions are made
- Among some public agencies, difficulty letting go of a desire to control the terms of their interactions with CBOs

For the new model to be sustainable, the results of community engagement during the CoO must be seen as positive and must have the momentum and resources to outlast the end of the grants. If both of these conditions are in place – and interim findings show progress in this direction – there is a good chance that community engagement practices can settle into the new model of interactions following the end of the CoO. The stability of this new model thus depends, in part, on the results of individual engagement relationships continuing to be positive and to produce positive results for both communities and agencies.

Our interim findings are that changes are being made consistent with the CoO's new vision for community engagement in the Twin Cities region, and that these changes appear to have some staying power if they can be reinforced by further support and additional, aligned efforts.

A final report, addressing the same research questions, will be prepared in the winter of 2014 based on the third year of the CoO and the second round of sub-grant activities.

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For more information

This summary presents highlights of the "*Community Engagement in the Twin Cities*" interim report. For more information about this report, contact Ellen Shelton at Wilder Research, 651-280-2689.

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