

LISC-BSC Partner Meeting Themes Summary East Side Prosperity Campaign (ESPC)

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 two meetings held by Wilder Research staff with East Side Prosperity Campaign (ESPC) staff and steering committee members, with additional background information for context. The first meeting was on Feb. 11th, 2014, attended by the organization leader and three steering committee members. The final focus group was held on November 21, 2014 with seven organizational partners.

This summary is meant to be an overview of the discussions and a supplement to the full meeting notes. 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

ESPC began in 2006 with a 3-year grant from the Bremer Foundation to the East Side Neighborhood Development Company (ESNDC) to build a shared vision and power by bringing together a range of individuals *across cultures and sectors*, including community-based and cultural groups, schools, human services providers, community developers and others on the East Side of St. Paul. Those three years generated strong relationships, a shared vision, and common goals in the areas of wealth and prosperity,

lifelong learning, community-building, and health and wellness, which came to be known as “vision areas” and later, “action areas.”

LISC funding began in 2008. With transitional funds and a consultant team, an interim steering committee of 17 East Side leaders worked to develop an implementation plan and structure to sustain the campaign. In 2010, ESPC officially adopted the Building Sustainable Communities framework. In the same year, it sponsored a regranteeing program to seed activities in the four vision areas. The effort continued to be housed by the East Side Neighborhood Development Company until 2011 when fiscal agency was transferred to American Indian Family Center.

In 2011 they hired the first full-time staff. The foundation that was laid enabled ESPC to revive broad community conversations and to begin organizing leadership to develop strategies for action in the four vision areas. New resources were raised to support staff, vision area activities, quarterly convenings, communications and a project to engage East Side constituents in the important work of transit planning—an area that crossed all four vision areas. By 2013, with LISC funding for a strategic plan and drawing upon five years experience and participant surveys, ESPC's vision for the East Side took shape in the mission to “convene, connect and catalyze across sectors to foster collaboration around equity and sustainable community change.” Rather than providing direct services or managing projects, ESPC continued to build on its strength in bringing people, organizations, and agencies on the East Side together who are working on different issues and areas around important topics to create the possibility of new work being developed and new ideas emerging to address issues and opportunities in the community.

Those present during the meeting could not attest to what conditions were like in the East Side prior to the original Bremer Foundation funding, but they did note that there is a 47% poverty rate on the East Side.

Activities and strategies

Following the “connect, catalyze, and convene” model, ESPC’s work primarily focuses on bringing together different organizations, institutions, and people in the community to meet one another, learn about each other’s work, discuss ways to collaborate, and then help them catalyze collaborative efforts. They also have focused a series of convenings around their four vision/action areas (community building and civic engagement; education and learning; health and wellness; and wealth and prosperity) to help create collaborative efforts and the initiatives that launched from those convenings, such as the Food Hub.

When groups meet together at a convening and decide they want to work together collaboratively to address an issue, ESPC has worked to then help catalyze these efforts. As the ESPC director said, “Our role is really about bringing people into the same space and supporting that space through agenda settings, note takings, calling people, and doing that kind of stuff. Whatever supports or ideas an initiative needs to kind of get some traction.” They also hold regular quarterly meetings, steering committee meetings, and “action area” meetings.

The conversations are often organized around an individual issue or a longer-term project that emerges organically. For example, with the Ramsey County Juvenile Reception Center proposal, they brought together community members to educate them about what it would look like to have that in the community, and about the prison industrial complex, and got people engaged around that issue. Representatives from the state, the city, the county, and different youth programming and criminal justice agencies were present at that convening. Another example was when the St. Paul Public Schools were trying to restructure the school system into neighborhood schools and to address concerns about limiting school options on the East Side. In response, they held a series of community conversations on the matter to help raise the issue because they recognized that no one else in the community was really talking about it. They were

able to start that conversation and bring people in the community and organizations and agencies together to discuss it.

The ESPC staff and steering committee members described how ESPC is able to be flexible and respond to emerging issues, as well as bring issues to the forefront by being more proactive at times and starting the conversation (e.g., East Side transit work). They described how ESPC’s coordinating role is focused on action, and is outlined by three phases: (1) convene the table; (2) connect those at the table to an action plan, and determine the driving force for it; and (3) determine who will take it on and catalyze it into action. Because they play the role of a convener, they also identify what partner organizations have the capacity to take the initiative forward.

With regard to capacity building, one example that was discussed was ESPC’s work with the East Side transit efforts, where they worked in a collaborative with other organizations and helped train community members on organizing and educating them on transit issues and how to impact policies/planning. Another example is simply convening organizations together and helping catalyze those collaborative actions around certain issues in the community; they provide the space and agendas that bring the organizations together and create the environment to bring new ideas and resources to action.

They also described having built political capital by showing public agencies that they are able to bring organizations and community members together to address issues successfully, so agencies are aware that they have to take the ESPC seriously. They have been able to transform the discussions in the community and who is at the table, thus reshaping power dynamics and the community’s access to positions of power. They utilize the power of agencies and meeting spaces to bring in constituents (including residents, small businesses, civic/cultural leaders, etc.) who would not historically have access to decision makers and public officials, and provide legitimacy to the conversation.

Learnings to date

Their convenings tend to primarily involve organizations and institutions; not only leaders, but mid-level staff as well in order to provide them with more perspective and sense of ownership. They have also held community conversation meetings to get the input of the community and provide a space for those voices to be heard. However, they feel that overall the best way to do their work and reach the community is through partnering with other organizations on the East Side that are closely connected with the community because they do not want to duplicate the efforts of other organizations in the area doing constituent engagement.

They described how they are also trying to figure out how to filter out the different people and organizations that come to them asking for convening meetings, and identify where they should be putting their limited resources and capacity as an organization. They are also able to leverage resources by partnering with organizations in the area and getting their staff/leaders to be on the ESPC steering committee and volunteering their time.

They have also learned that, with their role in the community, ESPC needs to be flexible and respond to emerging issues, as well as be proactive and start the conversation. This requires that they have built and maintain strong relationships with organizations and agencies in the area.

Evaluation hopes and fears

Regarding the overall Building Sustainable Communities evaluation, ESPC staff and steering committee members said they want to be able to document the outcomes of their convening and organizing work, and how those outcomes in the community come out of their work bringing the different organizations, agencies, and community members together and hosting discussions about community issues.

They also said it would be helpful to have some kind of tool that allows them to gather qualitative

information that tells the story about the impacts of the convening and catalyzing work that they do. They have previously surveyed other organizations in the area about their perceptions of the ESPC and its role, but they do not have any sort of tool for documenting the overall impact of their work.

Ideally, they would like the overall evaluation to address key questions about the effectiveness of the model, particularly questions such as, ‘What are the critical components that make catalyzing efforts successful? Is it the number of people? Amount of time? Resources? How does it move from connecting organizations and community members to initializing efforts and action steps? What capacity does a backbone organization need to do this successfully? What are the barriers to the community being ready to do and sustain the work?’

They also expressed some concerns about long-term sustainability of their program model and structure, which is flexible and adaptive over time but does not offer any direct services of its own and relies on organizational leaders who are often already overburdened in their roles. They said it would be helpful to see how other grantee organizations that are collaborating across sectors, identities and organizational cultures, are addressing sustainability issues.

In general, they also mentioned wanting to know what about the BSC model and ESPC model does not work well? What are the pitfalls? How can we tie learnings to specific indicators in the community? How do the community nuances of the East Side impact the model there versus other communities?

Final focus group with partner organizations

In a focus group with board leaders and other partner organization collaborators, participants described how ESPC has been effective in some areas of their BSC-related efforts, while also frequently facing challenges related to inconsistency of funding and staff, as well as changing visions for what role ESPC should have in the community.

The ESPC partners described how the inconsistency of funding and staff has strained their time and focus, particularly when it required partners to volunteer their time, resources, and energy to manage ESPC's collaborative activities. Although this has been a challenge for ESPC throughout the BSC grant, it began before the grant and has continued afterwards in new ways. Staff inconsistency and limited resources have also reduced the consistency of efforts to build relationships with residents, organizations, and agencies, which is an important component of the work of an organization that focuses on facilitating community discussions and initiatives.

Despite these challenges, partner organization representatives and board leaders described ESPC as having important beneficial outcomes and impacts with its convening work. Though they have attempted—with differing levels of success—to keep some BSC-funded initiatives in-house at ESPC, generally ESPC prefers to focus on its role as a convener of conversations with residents, organizations, and public officials. As a consequence, while it may facilitate initiatives early on to help launch actions discussed at these convenings, they generally prefer to find longer-term homes elsewhere for ongoing efforts. Their core work is to regularly host community conversations, and provide a space for regular networking amongst the many organizations, agencies, and residents that are connected with this work. Partners described this work as invaluable to their own organizations' efforts, and has been helpful in creating a space where constituents and organizations feel they can be informed about important issues and topics in their community and beyond, as well as have their voices and ideas heard.

However, focus group participants also mentioned that the level of constituent buy-in and engagement has fluctuated alongside the funding and staffing changes throughout the years, complicating this model at times.

They noted that when ESPC has helped facilitate initiatives and find them a permanent home in other organizations or agencies, they have been successful at promoting beneficial work in the community that has continued beyond the life of the grant or the life of ESPC's involvement in each particular initiative. In that way, ESPC serves as a convener and an incubator for organizations, agencies, and residents to identify, discuss, and take up efforts and initiatives for the sustainable improvement of the East Side. As one partner described, "... The value of that network and convening where people know you're going to be sharing info, and having a way to communicate that out to the broader community—those are our core strengths..."

For the past six months or so, partners have been meeting to discuss the future vision and direction of ESPC, and the participants report that they expect to continue to focus on the facilitating and convening work. Particularly, they noted the uncertainty that stems from funding, and that ongoing consistent funding is essential to the success of the Building Sustainable Communities model. Further, they expressed a wish to have fewer guidelines or prescriptions for the funding of this community- and context-specific work of community-driven backbone organizations.

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