

Summit University Planning Council: Ensuring Access to Safe Environments for All

Summary of the Summit University Planning Council's Work Through the Active Living for All Initiative

In 2013, the District Councils Collaborative was one of nine projects to receive funding from the Center for Prevention at Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota (the Center) through the Active Living for All (ALfA) initiative. All ALfA-funded organizations aimed to increase opportunities for physical activity in their community through policy, systems, and environmental (PSE) changes. In the fourth year of the ALfA project, the District Councils Collaborative and its staff managing the project were absorbed into the Summit University Planning Council (SUPC). Within this report, activities over the entire project period will be attributed to SUPC. With ALfA funding, SUPC engaged and encouraged Ramsey County Public Works and the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) to change their policies to be more responsive to the historic racial disparities in the Rondo Community and more inclusive of people with disabilities in their planning projects.

SUPC worked to revise the Saint Paul Street Design Manual with language to make streets and sidewalks more accessible and to promote active living. In addition, SUPC worked on two large demonstration projects: the Dale Street Bridge and Snelling Avenue. Both demonstration projects focused on improving walkability, safety, and accessibility in each Saint Paul neighborhood. Both also included extensive community engagement activities and new structures, such as a community advisory board, to ensure that the community's needs and vision were included in the process. This summary describes SUPC's work under ALfA from 2013-2018, including their accomplishments, factors that contributed to their success, project challenges, and plans for the future.

Key accomplishments

Over the course of the ALfA initiative, SUPC encouraged the implementation of multiple policy, systems, and environmental (PSE) changes in Ramsey County and established a stronger community engagement infrastructure to ensure broader inclusion and engagement in large scale planning projects. These efforts contributed to long-term changes in how Ramsey County and the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) approach transportation planning and implementation. The following is a summary of SUPC's key accomplishments.

Addressing pedestrian safety at the Dale interchange bridge to University Avenue. One of the key priorities for SUPC was to address pedestrian safety at the interchange on the Dale Street Bridge crossing Interstate-94.

- **Community engagement strategies.** This project included an extensive community engagement effort for gathering input and providing recommendations on the project as well as multiple community outreach events and workshops to engage the broader community. SUPC created a project Leadership Circle comprised of community stakeholders (residents and representatives of community-oriented organizations) and public officials to formalize the community engagement process. They also established a Public Art Advisory Group consisting of community and government representatives who would be involved in all steps needed to incorporate public art into the project. This included drafting the design and approving a memorandum of understanding that outlined the parameters for a public arts program. SUPC's community engagement efforts were also focused on ensuring that the views and priorities of people with disabilities were part of the conversation and that the project involved people most impacted by historical and current racial and ethnic disparities in the Rondo community. The public art incorporated into the redesigned bridge is long-term asset that reflects the Rondo community.
- **Policy, systems, and environmental changes.** In addition to bringing community voices to the table, significant steps have been taken to review how public infrastructure projects include people with disabilities. This involved more than just making the Dale Street Bridge compliant with the American Disabilities Act (ADA); it also meant considering ways to make the project design accessible, friendly, and respectful to people with disabilities. With the support of Ramsey County Commissioner Toni Carter, the community engagement work done through this project has been used as a model for incorporating community engagement processes into more Ramsey County Public Works projects. SUPC also successfully advocated for changes in Ramsey County's draft layout for the Dale Street Bridge that included their recommendations for improved pedestrian safety. In addition, because of this project, MnDOT changed its public arts policy so that art could be more easily incorporated into future project designs. One major obstacle was to build a bridge that met height and safety regulations for motorized transportation but was also safe for people with limited mobility. After recognizing that the standards set by both MnDOT and the Federal Highway Administration (FHA) were misaligned with ADA

standards, an interagency agreement was brokered between these two entities and Ramsey County Public Works so a final design could be approved.

Addressing walkability, accessibility, and safety on Snelling Avenue. The purpose of the Snelling Avenue project was to implement recommendations for walkability improvements on eight blocks of Snelling Avenue near the Interstate 94 bridge in Saint Paul. To achieve this goal, the SUPC engaged in multiple efforts to promote policy, systems, and environmental changes.

- **Community engagement strategies.** SUPC established a 14-member steering community comprised of community residents, government staff, and design professionals to use best practices from the City of Saint Paul draft Street Design Manual. The group reviewed the process and made recommendations to inform the project. A Snelling Construction Communications Committee (SCCC) was formed to maximize communication about construction updates, identify and address construction impacts, and build stronger working relationship between MnDOT and the community. In partnership with the Union Park District Council (UPDC), the Snelling Avenue Project implemented a recommendation to convert vacant land owned by MnDOT near the Interstate 94 bridge interchange into a park-like green space.
- **Policy, systems, and environmental changes.** MnDOT incorporated several recommendations from the Snelling Avenue Project in the reconstruction of Snelling Avenue and the bridge over Interstate 94 including: pedestrian islands at the tops of the freeway ramps to make sightlines and refuges (protected spaces for pedestrians) better; widening the sidewalk for increased accessibility; and replacing concrete boulevards with grass. The Snelling Avenue Project coincided with MnDOT's early exploration of improving their community engagement practices including creating a different infrastructure that facilitated deeper and more meaningful engagement. Through this project, MnDOT was able to reconsider what it means to work with communities in a meaningful way, while being aware of the power differentials between communities and large agencies. The process used by MnDOT for future projects will show the degree to which these insights have led to changes in institutional practices.

Factors that contributed to success

Deep engagement and relationship building. Throughout all their work, SUPC continuously centered the experiences of community members and encouraged public agencies like MnDOT and Ramsey County to revise their policies, practices, and approaches. In addition to lifting community voices, ensuring those who were left out of the planning process were invited to the table, and hiring members of the community to serve as project staff, SUPC also brought other community organizations to the table to help ensure implementation of the approved recommendations. Additionally, SUPC engaged elected officials and government staff in the process and created situations and infrastructure that allowed for interaction and experiential learning. This contributed greatly to the changes in approach by Ramsey County and MnDOT.

Using creative community engagement strategies. Staff at SUPC used multiple community engagement strategies to carry out their work. For example, they held Walkability Workshops to demonstrate street and crossing design elements to community residents and to help government officials and staff understand what was most needed from the community's perspective. These workshops ultimately informed the development of pedestrian improvement plans for the project. In addition to more traditional community outreach activities, like tabling and distributing information via local newsletters and social media, SUPC also held multiple Listening Sessions to invite community members to share their perspectives and to provide updates on the project.

Ensuring sustainability through policy change and advocacy. Staff at SUPC advocated for changes in policy and practice over the course of the ALfA initiative. One key strategy for sustainability after ALfA funding ends is to ensure advocacy continues throughout all Ramsey County projects, so that the policies and practices that emerged from SUPC's work are more broadly utilized. Furthermore, the Public Art Policy adopted by MnDOT, which created an avenue for artists to be compensated for public art on transportation and planning projects, was a large win for SUPC and the community at large. It was described by a community partner as a change that and will contribute to community healing in the Rondo neighborhood. In addition to policy changes and advocacy, documenting and sharing their approach and engagement efforts in their federal funding application helped secure \$9 million for improvements to the Dale Street Bridge.

Challenges and lessons learned

SUPC worked with funders and organizational partners to expand their scope of work and establish new project goals that reflected community priorities. Sometimes the community's agenda did not align with the objectives of the ALfA work or the Center's funding priorities. For example, community members wanted to focus on job training, local hiring, and using Disadvantage Business Enterprise contracting. While this was not the focus of the ALfA project or Ramsey County Public Works, it was a key priority for the community. Another example was including public art on the Dale Street Bridge. While this was not originally an objective of the ALfA project, nor something that Ramsey County and MnDOT had experience with, it became an important facet of the work because of its importance to the community.

The time needed by government agencies to adopt new approaches to engage community members in project design could have led to distrust, but SUPC was intentional in communicating how these perceived delays would lead to a better outcome. One challenge SUPC encountered was increasing attentiveness towards community engagement, health equity, and health disparities among Ramsey County Public Works staff. Specifically, SUPC found it was initially challenging to help staff see that building the Dale Street Bridge and associated road would affect the community in a negative manner if there was not a concerted and intentional effort to examine all the designs and the potential consequences. It took time for the Public Works staff to willingly change their approach, which also required SUPC to take extra steps to maintain the community's trust and engagement in work that seemed slow-moving to community members.

When community members' input was not reflected in the final design of the Dale Street Bridge, SUPC adjusted their tactics and expanded their advocacy work. The original drafts of the Dale Street Bridge layout only included one pedestrian crossing, which was a significant safety concern among community members. Six months after SUPC had laid out their concerns, MnDOT and Ramsey County Public Works released a final draft of the project that was identical to the original draft. As a result, rather than continuing to use traditional channels to advocate for changes, SUPC made the decision to expand their advocacy and reach out to elected officials in MnDOT, Ramsey County, and the City of Saint Paul; this ultimately led to greater responsiveness to community feedback as the work moved forward.

Throughout the project, SUPC worked to maintain community interest and engagement in the project while also managing expectations, particularly regarding decisions beyond their control. Throughout the ALfA initiative, SUPC strived to maintain a high level of community engagement, but it was not always easy. For example, when the federal funding application was submitted for the Dale Street Project, it was challenging to celebrate the accomplishment and sustain community interest while respecting Ramsey County's concern about raising hopes for a project for which implementation was not certain.

Moving forward

Public Art. The SUPC is continuing to work with the Public Arts Advisory Group to implement MnDOT's revised Public Art Policy. Three local artists who all have deep connections to the Rondo community were hired to begin design work through a short-term contract with an arts organization. That contract will move to the bridge engineering firm, further ensuring the design work will move forward. SUPC also hired a public art consultant to act as a mentor to artists and Ramsey County, and to serve as a liaison with Ramsey County's bridge consultant. The project's artistic integrations for the Dale Street Bridge and artist-framed community engagement approaches will also carry forward.

Advocacy. SUPC plans to further institutionalize these community engagement practices and emphasis on health equity work as a standard approach used in future projects. This will take sustained support of elected officials and agency leadership, as well as ongoing education of new stakeholders. However, with Ramsey County Public Works having interest in using this community engagement approach with other projects moving forward, SUPC has momentum and a potential future partner.



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