



A SYMPOSIUM REPORT

Civic Engagement for Thriving Communities

BY MELISSA KRYPEK

“Be in touch with your backbone, funny bone, wishbone and tiny, hollow bones.”

So Opalanga Pugh, a Denver-based master storyteller, told an enthralled audience during a NeighborWorks® Training Institute symposium luncheon in Denver in February. The first step to connecting with other people, Pugh stressed in a symposium that highlighted civic engagement, is to be in touch with yourself. Then, you’ll be better fit to create conversations with and listen to others – important aspects in connecting to those in a community.



Opalanga Pugh

PHOTOS BY SÉAN BENNETT

Connecting is strongly related to civic engagement – not just the town meeting and volunteer group type of civic engagement, but also the empowering and energizing kind whose dynamics can change a town, a city, or a region.

The role of civic engagement and its importance may be on the increase in view of the current pattern of reduced funding and increasing demand for community development services and affordable housing.

How can civic engagement help improve these issues? The answers were the underlying theme of the symposium, “Transforming Your Organization and Community to Thrive in 2010: Understanding Trends, Challenges and Opportunities,” sponsored by the Fannie Mae Foundation and Freddie Mac.

The symposium brought together experts and educators in community development, affordable housing, public policy, and economics for a day-long examination of the critical matters affecting communities. Plenaries, panels, workshops, and small group discussions offered a wide range of perspectives to help participants become better informed and involved citizens in their organizations and communities.

Civic Engagement’s Intent

“The real intent of civic engagement,” said Peter

Block, an author and consultant on empowerment and community reconciliation who facilitated the symposium, “is to shift the context within which traditional problem solving, investment, and social and community action take place.”

In order for organizations and communities to thrive, Block said, they had to “shift the nature of public conversation and change the order of assembly.”

This includes adjusting the leadership structure and letting the leader “create the conditions for civic engagement,” Block said, but letting individuals utilize their own expertise in taking responsibility, or accountability, for actions, and using this to transform the future as a group effort.

As an illustration, Block had the symposium’s chairs strategically set up in small semicircular groups. Participants seated in their groups represented community, he said; the small group exercises created connections; and when groups reported to the entire room, it created accountability and connected each group to the larger community. Thus, even the setting helped participants change their way of thinking.

Civic Engagement in Action

One presenter who saw his community change its way of thinking was Daniel Kemmis, a former mayor of Missoula, Montana, and now director of the Center for the Rocky Mountain West.

Kemmis noticed a growing restlessness and frustration among Missoula’s residents, who felt isolation in their work. Wanting to engage his community in a more meaningful way, he focused on how individuals could use their work to help contribute to its strength.

This newly connected community spurred collaborations with political rivals, Kemmis said, and the

outcome was an effective, powerful movement to increase the community's affordable housing. Cities or organizations need to pay attention to all the social issues in order to prosper, he said.

"More and more communities recognize the need to help themselves," Kemmis said. "Convergence of high purpose and good work will help communities thrive."

Housing and Policy Trends

In the Rocky Mountain and western states, according to another presenter, Sheila Maith,



Sharing questions during a participants' exercise.

managing director of policy and leadership development with the Fannie Mae Foundation, record homeownership rates are challenging even moderate-income households to find affordable housing.

"Trends in affordable housing and public policy are not a happy story," Maith said. "They're the story of adversity. Our success depends on our ability to transform adversity into opportunity."

Nationally, housing costs have risen faster than health care costs in the past five years, Maith said. Fourteen million families now spend more than half their incomes on housing; parents working a full-time job at minimum wage cannot afford a two-bedroom apartment; and 2.5 million households with children live in substandard housing.

As people flock to the wide open spaces of the western states, Maith continued, affordable housing and availability are also decreasing. With homeownership at record levels, the result is that we have created the largest anti-affordable housing interest group in history. Every homeowner, every family, counting on home equity to pay college bills or subsidize retirement wants prices to go higher, Maith said.

"Places like Utah, Wyoming and Idaho have nearly 75 percent homeownership rates," she said. "And therefore, have enormous anti-affordability coalitions."

Housing affordability pressures in the western states are affecting a range of demographic groups, Maith said. With an increase in seniors, for instance, those with small retirement incomes will have challenges with retiring comfortably. Immigrant and low-income homebuyers are experiencing challenges in Arizona, Nevada and Texas, among other states.

In response, Maith encouraged participants to enlighten the public, educate policymakers, and wake up the media. Look for opportunities to talk about the benefits of housing, she said. Promote alliances and coalitions with groups that can help meet the needs they identify through more affordable homes.

Participate in dialogues about tax policy, infrastructure investment, and school construction – all of which have an impact on affordable housing and availability, Maith said. Find issues that can provide the linkages to more funding resources. Offer a positive vision of change.

Demographic Trends

In the Rocky Mountain region and Texas, the population from 1990 to 2000 grew by more than 50 percent, compared to a 14.2 percent increase in the overall U.S. population. "It is one of the most dynamic regions in the country," said presenter Rogelio Saenz, a professor of sociology at Texas A&M University. "There is great diversity with respect to the composition of states."

Latinos show one of the largest population growths for the region, Saenz said. In Nevada, alone, he said, the Latino population increased 216.6 percent between 1990 and 2000. Studies show that each decade to come will show major increases in the Latino population.

One result, according to Saenz, is that U.S. institutions, such as business, higher education, political, health care, and religious, will increasingly be affected by and dependent on Latinos.

Transforming the Rural Economy

Given the region's affordable housing issues, transforming the rural economy could help communities in the long run. The rural economy, in fact, is already rebounding, with job growth increasing almost every month, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Net farm income also is rising, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

All of this is seen as an opportunity for positive transformation in rural communities by presenter Mark Drabenstott, vice president and director of the Center for the Study of Rural America, Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City. Drabenstott suggested four ways to the symposium that rural America could reinvent its economy.



Key presenters (left to right): Peter Block, facilitator; Mark Drabenstott of the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City Center for the Study of Rural America; Rogelio Saenz of Texas A&M University; Sheila Maith of the Fannie Mae Foundation; NeighborWorks® America Chairman Edward M. Gramlich, member, Board of Governors, Federal Reserve System; Daniel Kemmis of Center for the Rocky Mountain West; Gary Wolfe of NeighborWorks® America; and NeighborWorks® America CEO Kenneth D. Wade.

Regional development, or regional governance, is the key, he said. The emerging “Arrowhead Model” for regional development suggests that a partnership of three key institutions will transform the region’s economy, because combined the institutions create a critical mass crucial in new governance. The three key institutions, or three points of the arrowhead, are higher education, government, and the private sector.

Further, regions should find their niche, Drabenstott said. “Whatever it is, it must work in the global marketplace,” he said, “and include ‘exporting’ beyond the region.” Having a competitive advantage and using it effectively outside the region will increase a region’s economy. The Quad Cities (Davenport and Bettendorf, Iowa; and Moline and Rock Island, Illinois), known as a world-class distribution center, are an excellent example, he said.

Third, communities should encourage the growth of entrepreneurs with local roots to create local wealth and local jobs, said Drabenstott, instead of relying on industrial recruitment. In too many communities, he said, bringing in major industrial operations to create more jobs and money has proven expensive and risky. He cited Maytag, which in 2003 removed one of its plants from a town in Illinois. This, after the town, just a few years before, had offered financial incentives to tempt the plant into staying.

Finally, going back to the Arrowhead Model, rural America needs a knowledge-driven economy, Drabenstott said. To re-engage higher education there should be a connection with community

colleges, regional universities, and land grant universities. Reinventing a region’s community colleges might spur new philanthropic investments, government partnering, and business investment.

“Rural America has a bright future, but new strategies are needed to seize it,” Drabenstott said.

Putting It All Together

By redefining civic engagement and using it to connect participants at a symposium, or employees of an organization, or citizens in a community, the end result could be a powerful, cooperative effort, according to Peter Block.

One exercise Block encouraged was for symposium participants to discuss in groups what they had heard, how they felt about it, and what their responses were.

Reporting for one group, participant Christopher Gutierrez, a commercial real estate broker and developer from Waco, Texas, said we should move away from a “numbers game” toward a “personal connection” focus. By doing this, he said, we can take our organizational structures, which were set up to function with funding the way it has been, and reorient them to create new revenue streams, reduce costs, and continue to do good things.

“We need to capitalize on that resource that is uniquely American – volunteerism,” Gutierrez said, “in order to adapt and survive in an era of reduced funding.” ■

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View from the Fed

Edward M. Gramlich, a member of the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System and chair of NeighborWorks® America, told symposium participants that as the United States goes through a readjustment period, we need to be mindful of not letting inflation get out of control. There are risks on both sides of raising interest rates, he said. Increase them too fast, it will hurt the economy. Raise them too slowly, there would be inflation.

“We need to balance at a reasonable rate,” Gramlich said.

In terms of housing – it is tightly joined to the economy, he continued. Dependent on interest rates, affordable housing costs go up.

In homeownership, foreclosure is an issue. “Efforts need to be stepped up for prevention, Gramlich said.” He suggested increasing lending counseling, seeking alternative funds, and enhancing foreclosure-prevention programs.

A Denver Native Returns

From the gold boom to the oil boom to the high-tech boom, the Rocky Mountain West has had a knack for reinventing itself, and Colorado often reflects the region’s changing face. So it wasn’t surprising to me, a Denver native, that change was in the air when more than 600 housing and development practitioners, mainly from the West, met in Denver for a NeighborWorks® Training Institute.

I was particularly interested in the latest affordable housing challenges in the state and the region. Then – bingo! – I was introduced to Blake Chambliss, a man who had recently walked almost 850 miles around Colorado to raise awareness for much-needed affordable housing.

Chambliss, a veteran housing advocate, and Joe Giron, a long-time practitioner, made their trek last summer. They hosted 40-some community gatherings, with more than 800 participants, in towns of all sizes and diverse economies to learn about their housing needs.

Along the way, they enjoyed some of nation’s most beautiful scenery. In Chambliss’s words from his post-journey report, “From the eastern high plains, up into the Rocky Mountains, out west to the edge of the Great American Desert, and back through the mountains to the southern prairie grasslands of Southeast Colorado – birds, wildlife, and wild flowers were spectacular, and the fruits and vegetables from farmers’ roadside stands outstanding.”

What the walkers discovered about the state of affordable housing in Colorado is to some degree a barometer of what is happening in communities throughout the Rocky Mountain states:

“In mountain towns, service workers see their communities expropriated by second-home owners who claim the most buildable land, driving up the land, development, and construction costs. The result is that local workers cannot afford to rent, much less hope to own their homes.

“In rural communities, generally, migrant and immigrant workers have little access to housing and even less to housing that is decent enough to meet their personal or family needs.”

In urban areas, gentrification is displacing existing residents; regrettably, the walkers found precious few provisions being made to create appropriate long-term alternative accommodations for those being displaced.

“We are distressed,” Chambliss concluded, “by the social costs to families and communities as the result of deteriorating housing, poorly planned neighborhoods, and a laissez-faire attitude toward accommodating the needs of the working poor, the elderly, and special needs populations. In this, one of the most affluent states in this most affluent nation, it is unconscionable that we are leaving so many behind. We can do better.”

– Tom Austin

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