

Community Solutions Sessions Executive Summary

Southeast Rural Philanthropy Days

Draft Date: October 22, 2014

Community Solutions Session Overview

On September 25, 2014, the second day of the Southeast Rural Philanthropy Days (SERPD) conference, the Steering Committee convened a gathering of executive directors, topic experts, funders, and state and local government officials to foster collaborative dialogue and opportunities for regional success. Participants identified potential resources and discussed regional successes and challenges, learning from their local counterparts as well as statewide experts and stakeholders. This session explored vital regional partnerships and potential collaborative solutions. The sessions were designed to strengthen relationships and encourage dialogue across sectors and jurisdictional boundaries. The following report outlines outcomes of each of the sessions, identifies topics discussed, and explains the “Next Steps” for Community Solutions.

Morning Session. The Morning Session began with an outline of expectations and objectives for the day. The objective of the morning session was to discuss the key findings of the Listening Tour and share success stories from those in the region. The overall goal of the Community Solutions Sessions was to get a better understanding of regional issues and recognize how individuals can move forward on solving the two identified regional issues: downtown revitalization and workforce readiness.

The SE RPD Listening Tour took place on April 28-30, 2014, co-chaired by Chris Wiant, President and CEO of the Caring for Colorado Foundation, and Susan Steele, Executive Director of the Temple Hoyne Buell Foundation. The purpose of the Tour is for Colorado’s statewide and local foundations to learn more about the broad challenges and issues facing Southeast Colorado. On Nov. 28, 2012, at a Rural Funders Forum hosted by Sue Anschutz-Rodgers, RPD funders identified the desire to understand a region’s overarching needs, and the actions underway to address them, prior to a RPD conference. The Listening Tour concept is our solution to addressing this information gap, so that grantmakers will arrive at RPD better prepared to collaborate and support local needs (see also the 2014 SERPD Listening Tour report).

The Listening Tour delegation was comprised of senior leaders from several Front Range foundations, Community Resource Center staff and board members and RPD Steering Committee leadership. The delegation met with community leaders across all sectors. The goal was for funders to hear from high-level community leaders, in open discussions, about the character of the Southeast region, existing needs and current actions to address them.

Through the tour, funders sought to find new partnerships, diversify funding and increase impact through a better understanding of the needs of the community. The Listening Tour was very successful because of the significant number of Government Officials who attended the Listening Tour, as well as the start of partnerships between private, public, and philanthropic sectors.

Two primary questions were asked on the Listening Tour:

1. *How would you describe the personality and culture of your community?*
2. *What do you see as a key issue in your community?*

There were similar themes throughout the region: economic diversity and job creation, improved health resources, youth and community support, and alternative and vocational education. The following two themes emerged from the Listening Tour and became the focus of the Community Solutions Sessions at RPD:

1. *Downtown Revitalization*

2. *Workforce Readiness*

The Listening Tour Co-Chairs explained that the ultimate purpose of the Listening Tour and Rural Philanthropy Days is not just to identify where help is needed, but for local communities to come together and develop new opportunities and solutions. There is a lot more power in an entire community joining forces, and approaching a foundation with a unified, regional request.

Downtown Revitalization. Downtown Revitalization is not just about the building; it is about the services within the building. When services are located downtown, the whole community benefits from a revitalized Main Street, centralized services, and new opportunities to share resources and partner on programming.

The City of La Junta explained that the first people to leave the town were individuals living in second floor apartments above retail spaces. The city recognized that a turning point for downtown Durango came from a need to lodge students at Fort Lewis College. La Junta started trying to understand why retailers and individuals are not interested in living downtown. Otero Junior College (OJC) went through downtown buildings, and learned that the owners were not living in the buildings and did not have any commitment or interest in putting money into improving the condition of the buildings.

Communities are trying to attract new businesses and entrepreneurs to improve the quality of life within the traditional community. Collaboration of the assets and resources within the region can make the towns more attractive individually. Unfortunately, many of the communities lack capacity to pursue funding and collaborative opportunities. Volunteers, nonprofit organizations, and government leaders are often overburdened, and these communities expressed a need for help over a 2-5 year period with grantwriting and strategic planning in order to move these projects forward.

Workforce Readiness. In recent years, many vocational programs and alternative education opportunities in the Southeast are being cut from budgets. Many students are unprepared to enter the workforce due to a lack of training and skills, as well as an understanding of professionalism and workplace decorum. Factors that contribute to a lack of Workforce Readiness are frequently interrelated. Some of these issues include: education, healthcare access, childcare services, and substance abuse. C. Wiant explained that leaders need to look into how these various pieces fit together, and develop all-encompassing solutions. Having a vibrant and qualified workforce affects all sectors of the economy, from nonprofit organizations to healthcare institutions and agriculture.

Afternoon Break-Out Sessions. The Steering Committee contracted with two professional facilitators to lead the afternoon sessions. Lee Wheeler-Berliner worked with the Downtown Revitalization breakout group, and Summer Gathercole led the Workforce Readiness session. Both began the afternoon sessions by inviting small groups of participants to respond to the following two questions:

1. What did you hear this morning that really excited you?
2. Are there ideas that could be replicated in our communities?
3. What else should your community be thinking about?

Participants were then invited to write their thoughts down on a piece of paper, and the ideas were collected and categorized throughout the room. The top themes were collected and distributed, and participants were invited to select one of the themes for further discussion and brainstorming. Ideas were narrowed and collected again, and participants could select a different table discussion.

Downtown Revitalization Break-Out Session. The major themes that emerged through the first round of conversations were: housing, government policy, commerce, and building revitalization.

- ❖ Housing: One avenue towards downtown revitalization is to bring housing opportunities back to the second floors of buildings. This would require buy-in from building owners, and participants suggested fostering partnerships to generate incentives and minimize risk. These partnerships must include building owners; banks or other funding sources; and entities, such as colleges, prisons, and hospitals, who could rent apartments for short- or long-term employees.
- ❖ Government Policy: One of the major road-blocks to downtown revitalization is incentivizing absentee or bank-owned building owners to repair derelict buildings. Participants suggested taxing empty buildings as an incentive to promote owners to restore and utilize downtown spaces. Amnesty on building codes for a time was also suggested as a method for allowing organizations to satisfy safety requirements without too many building code restrictions. Another solution through government policy is to ensure that buildings are owned by people, not banks. Educating local governments on the Community Investment Act and the State Historical Fund are two resources to support local governments in acquiring buildings.
- ❖ Commerce: Local communities need to drive consumers downtown. The first step in this process is to understand the demographics, and collecting data on who is and is not shopping downtown. The participants suggested that towns focus on utilizing existing infrastructure to provide services downtown instead of building new facilities. Public entities or businesses should focus on identifying a downtown location instead of building outside of town. These entities would have to prove why it is imperative to build outside of downtown rather than in the center. Next RPD, each town will strive to have a newly utilized building downtown that they are proud to report on.
- ❖ Structure: The group recognized that many communities have buildings that are falling apart and becoming a public safety issue. One suggested option is to give six months of amnesty on decrepit buildings as an opportunity for owners to make repairs. Another option is to create co-ops in order to lower the cost of managing buildings.

Additional thoughts that emerged from this breakout session was to tap into the state's Main Street Program at the Colorado Department of Local Affairs (DOLA), evaluate resources and assets, create a vision plan for the entire region, and organize a program to promote economic restoration in the region.

Workforce Readiness Break-Out Session. The major themes that emerged through the first round of conversations were: Job Training, Childcare, Education, and Youth.

- ❖ Job Training: A major obstacle to effective job training is the slow pace of developing new curriculum to meet demand and capitalize on emerging opportunities. A suggested solution was to support partnerships between local businesses and educators to develop custom training programs that emphasize a specific local expertise or industry, but do not necessarily result in a degree. Other needs the participants identified include vocational training, mentorship programs, transportation, wrap-around tutoring, life skills classes, and flexible schedules for non-traditional students.
- ❖ Childcare: The cliff effect and funding for childcare are two major obstacles that Southeast Colorado are facing. The goal for the region is to have accessible, affordable and quality childcare, so that parents are able to work. This can be easily facilitated when employers provide improved public options. Resources include classes for parents, Colorado Preschool Program (CPP), and Child Care Purchasing Alliance (CCPA).
- ❖ Education: Participants identified a need to improve vocational opportunities, and to utilize these opportunities to help students transition between high school and higher education. These programs must teach both hard skills that apply to specific vocations, as well as soft skills such as resume writing, conflict resolution, interview skills, professional communication, and workforce behavior. Another inhibitor is that students often lack access to transportation, childcare support, and funds for higher education. Additional opportunities discussed included partnering with universities to create four-year program taught by local instructors, implement "Grow Your Own"

techniques and programs that support local industry through education of local youth, recruiting locals to train for available municipal positions by incentivizing students through loan forgiveness, childcare, and transportation.

- ❖ **Youth:** The youth of Southeast Colorado are an asset to the community; however, they are not learning many important soft-skills, such as conflict resolution, resume building, interview skills. These skills are as important, if not more so, than technical skills and experience. Participants offered several opportunities to make these skills more prevalent, including: building them into the Middle School and High School curriculums, mentorship programs, and parent education opportunities.

Conclusion and Champion Invitation. The session concluded with the two groups coming together to share the top solutions from the region as well as extending an invitation to communities to push forward and further develop regional strategies for the potential solutions identified in the breakout sessions.

Community Solutions Session Attendees

All community leaders from each of the eight counties (Baca, Bent, Crowley, Huerfano, Kiowa, Las Animas, Otero, and Prowers) were strongly encouraged to attend the Community Solutions Sessions at RPD. Specifically, municipal government representatives and anyone involved in the two topic areas are key stakeholders that should be in attendance. See Appendix A for a complete list of attendees at the Community Solutions Session of RPD.

Community Solutions Next Steps

While at the Community Solutions Sessions of SERPD, various Champions identified themselves as individuals who would be interested in advancing the ideas generated at the breakout sessions. Community Resource Center will begin convening these champions as an interim steering committee who will take the ideas generated at the conference, and develop goals and strategies for implementing community change around Workforce Readiness and Downtown Revitalization. Appendix B contains a list of the Champions from the Community Solutions Sessions of RPD.

Appendix A: Community Solutions Attendee Champion List