

Sustainable Communities in the Twin Cities: How Community Groups Are Working with Government to Transform Transitway Development



In late 2010, Russ Adams, Margaret Kaplan and Repa Mekha each received a phone call at their offices. On the other end of the line was a staff member from the Metropolitan Council, the Twin Cities' metropolitan planning organization, asking their organizations to consider taking a leadership role in a new project.

The council was working with other government, philanthropic and large nonprofit partners to develop a Sustainable Communities Initiative application to HUD. The initiative would promote sustainable, vibrant and healthy communities in the Twin Cities region, using major transitway expansion as a development focus. The agency wanted Adams, Kaplan and Mekha to form a Community Engagement Team to help include underrepresented communities in the challenging process of transitway planning.

The Twin Cities region was a recipient of one of the first five \$5 million Sustainable Communities grants from HUD, which aligned with a \$16 million investment from the Living Cities Integration Initiative. The two grant programs were combined to operationalize what became known as Corridors of Opportunity. HUD had named community engagement as a major component of the grant, but allowed each region to develop its own implementation model.

In creating the Community Engagement Team, project stakeholders in the Twin Cities created an innovative model that hadn't been considered in other regions. In most regions, the MPO took the lead on community engagement rather than community-based partners. The CET's role in Corridors of Opportunity is to elevate existing community assets along transitway corridors, while supporting innovation and tailored community engagement strategies that secure the inclusion of low-income people, people of color, people with disabilities and new immigrants.

Two years into the project, the Community Engagement Team has learned many important lessons that could be of value to community organizations in other regions that are involved in Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grant programs around the country.

■ SPEND TIME AND ENERGY MAINTAINING GOOD RELATIONSHIPS WITH COMMUNITY ALLIES.

Despite the commitment to good community engagement from the Corridors of Opportunity Policy Board (which acts as a steering committee for the project), the early stages of the project were tumultuous for the Community Engagement Team members. The organizations these community leaders represented—the Alliance for Metropolitan Stability, the Minnesota Center for Neighborhood Organizing (MCNO) and Nexus Community Partners—were handpicked through a closed process, which they knew would raise red flags for their allied organizations in the field. Complicating matters, they were only given four business days to learn about their proposed role and to decide if they would participate.

“There wasn't any sort of community process to inform the grant application itself,” says Kaplan, who was then the operations director of MCNO. “Saying you're going to engage communities, but starting without their input, you are starting five steps back.”

Adams, the executive director of the Alliance for Metropolitan Stability, says that most community allies encouraged his organization to take on the role, while being very clear about the need to maintain some distance from the “inside game” in order to stay relevant with the community.

Despite checking in with allies, the early phases of the project were marked with distrust and misconceptions from some community organizations that resented the lack of process that positioned these three organizations as powerful leaders in a regional process. The CET had the dual challenge of assuring fellow community leaders that they would use their new powers for good, while building trust with public sector leaders who sometimes saw community groups as barriers to progress rather than willing partners.

“How do you maintain your integrity as an organizer, when you go from having a government agency as a target to having the agency as a partner?” asked Joan Vanhala, a coalition organizer with the Alliance. “In the first six months, it felt like we were running the rapids in our relationships of our social justice allies.”

■ **BUILD STRONG RELATIONSHIPS WITH YOUR TEAM.**

To ensure that they would not be caught by surprise and be forced to make quick decisions that could damage relationships, the CET began organizing their workplan before the funding was even awarded. Team members began getting to know one another, building trust and understanding one another’s self-interest in the project. Each partner believes this early stage was critical to the success of the partnership.

“When we got called in, we didn’t know each other,” said Mekha, executive director of Nexus Community Partners. “One of the critical things we did was to learn about each other’s missions, values, beliefs, key partners, our approach to the work and what we mean by ‘equity.’ It allowed us to stand as one as we moved through the rest of the work.”

■ **KNOW THE FEDERAL RULES THAT GUIDE YOUR WORK.**

The other important task the team invested time in early on was carefully reading through HUD’s Notice of Funding Availability for the grant. This helped the CET understand what HUD’s intention was with regard to advancing equity and community engagement, rather than how it was being defined by partners locally. They learned that HUD had a strong interest in seeing low-income people, people of color, immigrants and disabled people take on a leadership role in the work.

“We could anchor our project in this equity language and principles,” said Kaplan. “When people said, ‘We need to be sure underrepresented groups like the business chambers are here,’ we could say, ‘No, that’s not what HUD means by underrepresented groups.’”

■ **THEN, DEFINE YOUR OWN RULES.**

The CET had a detailed workplan well ahead of any of the other workgroups in the project, which in many ways allowed them to set the tone for their own work and for the work of the entire initiative. They organized the first public event for the initiative, a large equity-focused forum featuring national equity leaders like PolicyLink’s Angela Glover Blackwell, the University of California Berkeley’s John Powell and local University of St. Thomas Professor Nekima Levy-Pounds. The event was attended by several hundred people, including many Corridors of Opportunity Policy Board members. After a presentation by Levy-Pounds on the Twin Cities’ egregious racial disparities, Blackwell turned to the audience and asked, “Are you embarrassed? I would be.”

The event was an early turning point for the initiative. Shortly thereafter, the Policy Board passed a shared definition of equitable development to guide Corridors of Opportunity work. And when external community groups like the African American Leadership Forum and PolicyLink started raising questions about the racial constitution of the Policy Board, the CET was able to work from the inside to create more space for leadership of color. Mekha was promoted from an ex-officio member of the Policy Board to being a voting member. Jonathon Sage-Martinson of the Central Corridors Funder Collaborative stepped off the Policy Board to make more room for another leader of color. This opened the gate for more people of color to join the Policy Board and started a transformation of the way people thought about regional leadership.

“There are leaders in the community and then there are leaders who decision-makers are comfortable with,” said Vanhala. “We have to shift the mind-set about who the right kinds of leaders are. It’s an ongoing practice.”

■ DEVELOP PUBLIC SECTOR ALLIES.

All of the CET organizations believe the government has a powerful and positive role to play in advancing equity. Yet when it came to the day-to-day work of making public institutions more accountable to underrepresented communities, some of the CET leaders were more accustomed to viewing the public sector as an organizing target, not a partner. As public sector and philanthropic allies began to more publicly support equitable principles and processes, the CET identified key allies that could help advance their equity agenda from the inside.

“In some other regions, we’ve heard that the whole project is under attack as a government intrusion,” said Kaplan. “We believe that government can improve people’s lives, but if it doesn’t connect with the community that’s a problem. We have an opportunity in the Twin Cities to counter the prevailing frame.”

CET members say that key allies, including public officials, philanthropic leaders and Met Council staff were committed to equity and came into the partnership with a willingness to learn from communities. Originally, there were some concerns by public agency staff regarding how the CET’s work would play out. While there were some public sector skeptics, a significant and influential collection of public officials and agency staff threw their support behind the CET’s engagement grants process, the materials they were producing and especially the new relationships they were bridging between community groups and corridor project managers. Once the CET identified who could help build support for their initiatives, and intentionally strengthened those relationships, they began seeing a greater transformation in the region.

“There are people on the Policy Board and within the Met Council who have been very good allies,” said Adams. “If you have a bloc of support, you’re able to do a lot of good things”

■ MODEL GOOD COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT.

A major portion of the CET’s assignment was to distribute \$750,000 to support community engagement of underrepresented communities along the Corridors of Opportunity’s seven existing and planned transitways. The group was charged with making funding recommendations for approval by the Policy Board, putting them in a gatekeeping role that could have stressed their working relationships with partners.

They decided instead to model good community engagement practices by forming a community-led Grants Review Committee. Based on the process of a local community funder, the Headwaters Foundation for Social Justice, they developed a formal grant application and a review process led entirely by the committee. These community leaders evaluated proposals, conducted site visits and forwarded final grant recommendations to the CET, who then took them to the Policy Board for approval.

Over the past two years, this process funded 23 grants to community organizations to educate residents about transitway development and involve them in the planning process. The granting process took considerably more time than it would have for the CET to simply choose the grantees themselves. But the process had more credibility with the community and the Policy Board because the people affected by transitway development had a role in identifying good projects and influencing investments in local communities.

“There was a tension between needing to be fast and needing to have a process that took the time to have meaningful opportunity in creating it. We knew it needed to happen now, or yesterday or three months ago, but it wasn’t worth sacrificing the community process,” said Kaplan.

Another key decision they made was not to take any of the money for themselves, even though the process of running the CET took up a significant amount of their organizational resources. They raised all of the funds through private foundations, which helped maintain their credibility with community partners.

■ **EMBRACE THE OPPORTUNITY TO ADVANCE EQUITABLE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT.**

Although the re-granting work was the majority of what was envisioned for the CET, the group’s leaders saw an opportunity to go beyond engaging individual communities along transitways. They thought they could use the convergence of regional leaders to transform the way community engagement happened on all future transitway projects.

They created a Community Engagement Steering Committee to evaluate and recommend improvements to existing community engagement structures in the Twin Cities region. Community leaders from throughout the region join together at monthly steering committee meetings to develop regional best practices on community engagement. For example, they developed recommendations for effective transitway community advisory committees, and met with Met Council Chair Sue Haigh to ask that they be incorporated into the agency’s process. The goal is to shift the systems by integrating sustainable practices beyond the life of the Corridors of Opportunity Project. At the end of the project, regional community engagement practices should be transformed so that residents can play a meaningful role in developing a vision for the future of their communities every time a new transitway is developed.

“We really believe that by investing in a more equitable process on the front end, we’ll have better outcomes for everyone in the future,” said Adams. “When community engagement is done right, we get better results.”

Early indications are that it’s working. Small community organizations have developed trusting working relationships with corridor managers and other public officials who influence transitway planning. They are looked to as experts on their communities and consulted before decisions are made. It’s not perfect yet, but it marks a huge change from business as usual.

“There was a history here of people always being on the outside trying to fight their way in, always feeling a sense of opposition, frustration, and lack of meaningful points of entry,” says Mekha. “To see the shifts I’ve seen in a short time, it’s really inspiring.”

