Entrepreneurial Communities:

Report on Community-Based Planning Process for the Heart of Texas Efficient Towns and Counties Co-op

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**Community-Based Planning (CBP)**

The overall intent of community-based planning is to develop a comprehensive and well-managed plan that individual and associational actors can utilize to guide local community development initiatives. The process directly engages community leaders and the broad-based citizenry in an active effort to move their community from today’s reality to tomorrow’s possibilities. Examples of implementation of this program include: “Community-based Plan toward the Restoration of Mary Allen College”, Crockett, Texas, “Leadership Vernon”, the “Vernon Economic Development Planning Session,” “Nocona EDC Roundup,” “City of Rosebud CBP,” “Teague CBP,” and “Hubbard CBP.”

In the most basic terms, the goal of community-based planning is to bring local stakeholders together into a productive forum for discussing the future of the community in a productive way. The attention then turns to setting actionable goals that can be accomplished realistically by the individuals involved. The two keys to community-based planning are the incorporation of diverse stakeholders who normally do not have the opportunity to work together, and a focus on incrementally larger goals and achievements over time.

Sam Houston State University’s Center for Rural Studies was chosen as the facilitator for the CBP. The Center has extensive experience in conducting and facilitating local community development processes, including community-based planning. The process utilizes the book *Preparing for the Future: A Guide to Community-Based Planning* by Gene L. Theodori, Ph.D., Founder of the Center for Rural Studies, as a base for facilitative practice. Using this basic guide, facilitators then work directly with community members to customize the process to fit the needs of the community.

Summary Process

The process begins with recruitment. The facilitators rely on local leadership to identify key stakeholders in the community who are active in the community. Facilitators make an initial presentation to this group, demonstrating how the CBP is designed to take the current community situation and move it toward an *active, conscious* community. An active, conscious community is one that not only takes action, but has the ability and awareness to come together meaningfully around difficult issues, work through challenges, and emerge with a solution that is acceptable to most people. This is not common in most communities, but it is the eventual goal of the CBP and is the result of hard work, persistence, and conscious effort to overcome differences. Facilitators stress three main points: 1) The whole process belongs to the community, not the facilitators. 2) In the facilitation room, participants leave their institutional labels behind. They are just citizens, and nobody is more powerful than anyone else in the room. 3) Participants must now reach out to people *they do not normally interact with* and bring them to the next meeting.

With the rules of interaction set, the next series of meetings are designed to strategically discuss what are sometimes very basic issues. Participants debate, interact, and work through simple problems, such as what the mission statement of the community should be, what the community stands for, and what the biggest issues are facing the community. While these may seem obvious, part of the problem in many communities is that there is an assumption that everyone knows the answers to these questions – but in reality, everyone has a different answer. Facilitators work to create a “safe space” where differences can be aired productively, and differences in opinion are all taken equally seriously. Participants then work toward 1) A mission statement for the community that captures everyone’s feedback, 2) A vision statement with attainable goals, 3) Identifying the key challenges affecting the community that cannot be solved with one group working alone. Facilitators work with the community to identify those issues that are highest priority *that can be directly addressed by the group itself* without significant external support. Once an action plan is in place, facilitators quickly move the group into applied action. Participants are expected to report back to one another and hold each other accountable for progress in the community.

After developing these habits of identifying issues, brainstorming across boundaries, and developing an action plan, the group must now stand on their own. The facilitator then works with the community to develop a formal or informal “charter” to keep the group going following the withdrawal of the facilitator. Communities then often create their own working groups to keep up the momentum in perpetuity, identifying new community-driven goals and finding ways to solve them as a team.

CBP was attempted in five communities in the HOTCOG region. Three of these communities, Rosebud, Hubbard, and Marlin, went through the entire process and made substantial accomplishments. Two communities, Teague and Tehuacana, did not complete the process.

Outcomes

One of the challenges of community engagement work is that outcomes are often not easily measured. However, citizens typically report that the outcomes of community-based engagement and planning are exceptionally *meaningful,* and often times change the way that business is conducted in the community or overcome long-standing conflicts and barriers to collaboration. This, in turn, leads to a long-term improvement in future community performance, innovativeness, and collaboration, and reductions in conflict and gaps in communication. In community-based planning, we measure outcomes on the citizens’ own terms, and tend to take a holistic view at what citizens have accomplished that otherwise could not have been done without the CBP. The following key outcomes were created by citizens, acted upon by citizens, with solutions designed by citizens, and merely facilitated by the Center for Rural Studies.

**Rosebud.** In only a few short months, Rosebud transformed from a community with several internal conflicts to a well-functioning team. Rosebud has focused its efforts on the following:

* Code Enforcement: Teams have been established to reach out to owners of abandoned properties and ask them to improve the property. Since this is a community effort, it has a different feel than a government entity ordering cleanup. Steps are also being taken to create avenues for cleanup assistance through the local government.
* Local Branding/Marketing: A separate team has been improving the branding and marketing of the town, financing and building new signage, and improving the downtown with artistic murals.
* Rosebud 20/20: The Rosebud team has formalized their team activities by creating an ongoing group with its own identity. The Rosebud 20/20 team meets weekly to discuss creative and strategic visioning in the community, and is the direct result of our CBP efforts, and especially, the will of the citizens after succeeding at their initial goals.

**Hubbard.** Hubbard has made quick progress toward solving community problems on four fronts. The community prefers a less formal structure, but has been effective in making progress on early goals. Some of these early accomplishments include:

* Civic Center. Hubbard’s citizen group has made numerous improvements to the downtown’s civic center. The goal is to create a community space capable of holding indoor/outdoor events such as weddings, festivals, and concerts. Events are already being held, and this has created a new revenue stream for the community.
* Welcome Basket. To build new citizen involvement, the citizens have created a welcome basket program, alerting new residents about city events, local businesses, and groups that citizens can join. Citizens pick up their basket when they sign up for water service.
* Community Calendar. The citizen group is currently working across boundaries to coordinate and post an integrated community calendar to keep *all* citizens informed, and also inform those outside the community of local happenings in a more coordinated way. This avoids the previous problem of having multiple, conflicting calendars, reducing attendance at local events.
* Integrated Website. Hubbard is working with leaders from their high school to update, modernize, and maintain the community’s website with the latest information.

**Marlin.** Marlin has been grappling with a divided community and a local sense of negativity about what Marlin has to offer. Their CBP has been aimed at turning around negative thoughts and ideas, and creating a visible “buzz” for people traveling through the community. Marlin is still undergoing the CBP process.

* Local Art. Marlin is working with a Houston-based artist living in Hubbard to create unique, hand-painted street planters out of recycled materials like ranch buckets, washtubs, and trash cans. Not only do these planters beautify and green the downtown, but donors can sponsor the planters, enabling the community to pay for its own beautification initiative.
* Community Work Day. Marlin has organized its first regular community work day, where citizen volunteers and youth groups will tackle hands-on projects in the downtown, including installing planters, washing windows, removing litter, and generally cleaning the main street.
* Publicity. Citizens of Marlin are in the process of developing better marketing within the region by focusing on some of the citizens’ latest activities, like the community work day. Citizens will develop routine press releases of local activities, and the Marlin Democrat (newspaper) has been publicizing the CBP.
* Volunteerism. One work group is focusing on getting youth, faith-based, and other groups involved, and especially on fostering communication and shared volunteerism experiences across the major north/south social division in town.

Impacts for the Heart of Texas Region

Very few regions are currently engaged in anything like the CBP, which sets HOTCOG apart as an innovator in community development. It is important to note why CBP is having a pronounced impact on rural Texas communities, and why this method could be useful in other communities within the HOTCOG region over time.

* **Effective.** When the process is seen through to completion, citizen-driven progress is *always* made by design.
* **Inexpensive/High Value.** CBPs can be launched for a very small fraction of the cost of infrastructural improvements, consulting exercises, or labor-intensive programs. Participants report a new sense of ownership and high satisfaction early in the process, with very little up-front cost. More costly projects can also be addressed by the CBP, with citizens taking the lead to find funding with facilitator assistance.
* **Fast.** Citizens set goals and get to work within the first few meetings. Substantive progress is typically evident in 6-12 months.
* **Scalable.** Community work groups can intersect to form alliances and regional working groups to address regional issues.
* **Customizable.** CBPs can address general community development issues as they have here, or can be tailored to address specific issues in the community, such as boosting entrepreneurship, addressing water shortages, or managing invasive species in agricultural areas.
* **Independent.** CBPs reduce the dependence of communities on governments, agencies, and outside funding.
* **Perpetual.** CBPs do not stop after the facilitator leaves, but can become a permanent (but flexible) feature of any community.

Citizens have already identified new issues to be tackled following the CBP, and we expect great things from these groups as time goes on.

**Strategies Informed by Community-Based Planning Process**

One of the key features of the scenario planning process has been an enhanced level of community engagement. In some communities, collaboration has led to a renewed sense of common purpose and citizen action. This momentum is important to cultivate and maintain over time in successful, dynamic regions, as sometimes the most noticeable action will take place at the community level. Some identified strategies that are appropriate for community-level action have to do with understanding the community’s dynamics more thoroughly, assessing infrastructure condition and usage, and taking an inventory of places in need of improvement.

It should be noted that many of the recommendations in the overall plan can be coordinated by city government. However, there is another factor that should not be ignored in the planning process: the citizens. As described in the report’s section on community-based planning and engagement, citizens are often able to coordinate local action quickly, effectively, and inexpensively. Community action is greatly helped by a community engagement process to bring people together across diverse backgrounds, and build common strategies grounded in citizen values. This sounds a bit fuzzy, but citizen energy can be easily directed toward meeting some of the community’s most critical needs on a tight budget. Additional recommendations that make sense at the community level – some of which are already being done in Heart of Texas communities – include the following:

1. Community beautification, cleanup, and Main Street improvements
   1. Community gardening initiatives, festivals, and public events
   2. Local artisan contributions like murals, planters, and Main Street improvements
2. Coordinating diverse community information sources into one, publicly-available source
   1. Furthermore, connecting these community “news networks” with formal media outlets to direct attention to community events - improving the community’s image across the region
   2. Developing welcome and orientation materials for incoming and potential residents, including locally-supported welcome baskets, orientation events, and signage
3. Taking code enforcement seriously by getting citizens involved in contacting absentee and delinquent landholders
4. Enhancing the small business environment by convening entrepreneurs
   1. Group strategy sessions to build teamwork across former competitors, to help them compete “as a region”
   2. Developing a commercial identity that attracts customers and enhances local demand for local products and services
5. Connecting citizen groups to projects that typically required grant funding
   1. Building youth participation by creating youth-focused community service and apprenticeship events
   2. Boosting volunteerism by connecting volunteers more effectively with local needs

Another potential area for regional collaboration has to do with strategy development, especially around business development, marketing, and promotion. Some towns have indicated an interest in promoting the business environment of their community, and expanding commercial and industrial offerings there. While business development may have some benefit in any community, collaboration as a region will be critical for attracting customers, companies, and entrepreneurs to the region. Many smaller communities struggle to create downtown environments that are capable of competing with larger cities, making urban areas appear more amenity-driven to young professionals. However, the low cost of living and high quality of life afforded by the Heart of Texas region become even more potent when communities work together strategically to provide a complementary set of amenities. While not co-located in the same municipality, creative amenities and business opportunities may be located “within half an hour” of any other location. The entire region becomes a “destination,” as tourists and workers alike can go out for dinner in Marlin, shopping in Fairfield, outdoors activities near Hubbard – all while taking in short, scenic drives in between. The region is poised to promote a country lifestyle filled with modern amenities, and close to major urban centers when needed. Coordinating this effort will mean continued relationship building across communities to identify the potential developmental strengths of each, and crafting a common identity that can serve as a marketing strategy for the entire region.