



Community leaders share challenges, rewards of collaboration at Roundtable



By Kelly Koster

SAINT PAUL, M.N. – More than 30 attendees from 22 organizations gathered at the Model Cities Communities Room on University Avenue on February 24, 2010, to hear impassioned community leaders share their raw experiences — the triumphs and the difficulties — in realizing the true meaning of collaboration.

Collaboration, in this case, meant creating neighborhood-centric, multi-partner coalitions aligned with the Building Sustainable Communities initiative supported by Twin Cities LISC.

As part of a monthly roundtable series organized by the Alliance for Metropolitan Stability, the event, titled “Community Partnerships for Success,” drew excellent attendance according to Joan Vanhala, coalition organizer with AMS.

“I appreciated the different leaders who talked honestly about their challenges in working with coalitions towards one common goal,” said Vanhala.

Those leaders included Mari Bongiovanni, executive director, East Side Neighborhood Development Company; Staci Horwitz, program director, City of Lakes Community Land Trust; Cathy Maes, executive director, ICA Food Shelf; Judy Elling, executive director of ResourceWest in Hopkins; and Nieeta Presley, executive director, Aurora/St. Anthony Community Development Corporation.

During the two-hour session, leaders outlined the formulation of their collaborative, conveying both excitement and frustration in the challenges and rewards of developing cross-sector partnerships.

“In North Minneapolis, there’s been a lot of conversations about what community means,” said Horwitz, who noted the impact her recent move to the neighborhood has had on her outlook.

Horwitz emphasized the importance of focusing through a community lens and not an organizational lens.

“Could we set aside our own organizational agendas or personal agendas to see what we could accomplish as a group?” she said. “Are we really thinking about the community as a whole? Or are we thinking about our own personal issues?”

This shift in thinking resonated with all four speakers who were quick to point out the sometimes arduous process required to achieve it.

Presley explained the method of nine organizations from the St Paul Central Corridor rating and settling on 12 projects that all contained some element of “community capital,” a framework that emphasizes assets like human, natural, social and political, over deficits. The group is now known as the Frogtown Rondo Action Network under the unified coalition name.

To demonstrate the now tighter-knit community climate, Presley compared the current rally around the impending light rail development with the previous I-94 revamp which affected the same area.

“I-94 was devastating a predominantly African-American neighborhood through the construction — and other ethnic diverse populations as well,” said Presley. “But with 94, there wasn’t community influence.”

Although each metro area is aiming for the same integrated vision, different communities warrant unique solutions.

“I can see that in the different presentations, we’re at different levels of maturity, and we all came out in completely different ways,” said Bongiovanni. “We [St Paul’s East Side] needed to sit at the table for quite a while.”

After four years, Bongiovanni admitted her collaborative is still working on finding a comprehensive voice, which has slightly fragmented recently due to resident churn in a tough economy. That said, she noted the effort put forth in a multi-year process that started with informational meetings and evolved into 64 organizations sitting at a table calling each other to ask for advice and referrals.

“That was a big step,” she said. “Before we were all in our little silos and hoping that we would get funded and others wouldn’t because that would be more money for us.”

Finding a common collective voice among 60+ organizations seems daunting enough. Add to the mix 37 different languages and dialects, and that is the reality of Blake Road, a neighborhood in Hopkins composed of 2,000 renters, only 100 homeowners, 40 businesses and 700 kids. Like St Paul’s East Side, Blake Road struggles with resident churn and a dwindling homeowner population.

Despite the obvious challenges, Elling pointed out the advantage of many organizations in the Hopkins area having a previously established collaborative relationship. She also emphasized the importance of actively involving residents in initiatives and keeping them engaged.

“We hold short working groups so they have an end task and they can stay energized,” said Elling.

Other cross-neighborhood themes that surfaced during the roundtable included a focus on long-term investment, resident churn and turnover due to the recession, as well as moving past talk to action.

Questions arose from participants concerning gaps in resources, strategies around employment and education opportunities, partnerships with bigger institutions and universities and leveraging these collaboratives for power and influence at the political level.

“We do recognize we have a certain amount of political power, but we have not harnessed it,” said Horwitz.

Maes added, “They continued to talk about us at the City Council meetings. We’ve got some power here and we need to work the room.”

Post Q&A, the room at the roundtable was certainly worked with a diversity of organizations and participants connecting and planning for future meetings and partnerships of their own.

Attendees included Alliance for Metropolitan Stability, City of Lakes Community Land Trust, Hamline University, St. Paul Parks & Rec, William Mitchell Community Development Clinic, Eco Education, Emerge, Model Cities, City of St. Paul Human Rights Equal Economic Opportunity Department, Twin Cities LISC, Native American Community Development Institute, The Association of Non-Smokers MN, Vision in Living Life, Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, Organizational Guides, Amherst H. Wilder Foundation, YWCA of St. Paul, Vital Aging Network, Aurora/St. Anthony Neighborhood Development Corporation, East Side Neighborhood Development Company, ICA Food Shelf Minnetonka, and Resource West Hopkins Minnetonka Family Resource Center, and a student from the University of Minnesota.

“The presenters themselves learned from each other, and the people who attended learned from the presenters, said Vanhala. “People were very engaged.”