

# An Evaluation of the City of Brooklyn Park's Community Engagement Initiative



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# Community Engagement Initiative



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## Background

In December of 2009, Brooklyn Park began a five-year Community Engagement Initiative (CEI), bringing together community members, volunteers, and city staff to change the way that the City engages with residents. After holding a series of “Community Cafés” to learn from community members about the issues that are important to them, a core planning team was formed to set a direction for the new initiative. This team of residents, community leaders, and city staff created the strategic goals and structure that guided the initiative, and the mission statement and core values that

guide the city. The overarching goals of the initiative were for ninety percent of resident to feel proud to live in Brooklyn Park, feel that it is a thriving community, and feel that they have the opportunity to succeed. From 2010 to 2015, the youth, diversity, resources, and measurement teams, along with the core planning team, worked tirelessly to plan, implement, and evaluate strategies for meaningfully engaging and empowering Brooklyn Park residents. Today the Community Engagement team, which grew out of the efforts of the CEI, is an established part of city government, and departments across the city utilize community engagement in their planning and decision-making. CEI has had a lasting impact in Brooklyn Park through the events, organizations, and partnerships it began, and through the resulting shift in the city’s culture.



## Rationale

This program evaluation was conducted as part of the Resilient Communities Project (RCP), an initiative of the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs (CURA) at the University of Minnesota’s Humphrey School of Public Affairs. The evaluation was requested by the Community Engagement Coordinator at the City of Brooklyn Park to evaluate the process, and potentially the impact, of the CEI that laid the foundation for transition to a new initiative for community engagement. As Brooklyn Park transitions to its Brooklyn Park 2025 initiative, a new plan for engaging its residents in the future of their city, an evaluation of the initiative that preceded it could provide valuable information.

## Methods

Data for the evaluation of the CEI were gathered primarily from three sources: program records, individual interviews with key stakeholders, and a Ripple Effect Mapping (REM) session.

### Records

Program records and surveys conducted as part of the CEI, provided by the city, were examined to understand the initiative's process and outcomes. Data gathered from records included the names of planning committee members and the teams on which they served; number of volunteers; descriptions and dates of, and attendance at, community engagement events; and planning process descriptions. Survey results were gathered by the city to assess progress toward the CEI's overarching goals (ninety percent of residents feeling proud to live in Brooklyn Park, feeling that it is a thriving community, and feeling that they have the opportunity to succeed). Program records differed from year to year in terms of type of information recorded and the level of detail. Therefore, caution is warranted in drawing conclusions from year-to-year comparisons. Data gathered from program records served primarily to support or add detail to the data gathered through interviews and through the Ripple Effect Mapping session.

### Interviews

One-on-one interviews were conducted with twelve key stakeholders involved with the CEI at various points before and during the evaluation period. Interviews were semi-structured (Appendix A), with slight variations depending up on the interviewee's role in the CEI, and lasted between forty-five minutes and two hours in length. Questions focused on the individuals' experience with the initiative, areas for its improvement, and the initiative's impact in the community.

Key stakeholders included one former city manager, the current assistant city manager, the city's former Volunteer Coordinator, two former Community Engagement Coordinators, the current Community Engagement Coordinator, the city police department's former Crime Prevention Coordinator and Community Liaison, several former program volunteers, and the current Community Engagement Director for the city, and CEI volunteers and participants.

Interviews were audio recorded with permission while the evaluator took notes during the interviews. Later, the evaluator listened to the audio recordings to note any details

that contributed to a fuller understanding of the issues raised. Interviews were analyzed for broad themes, and for specific examples of process details, successes, challenges, areas for improvement, and changes in the individuals' experiences living and working in the community.

### Ripple Effect Mapping

REM is a form of group interviewing and structured collective brainstorming that is designed to capture a full range of impacts of a program - from broad themes to small connections and outcomes. It allowed for a large group of diverse individuals who had experience with the CEI to collectively, in real time, come to a consensus about the most important themes that emerge from their individual perceptions. It also allows for chains of events to emerge as participants build off of each other's experiences.

A typical REM session consists of a couple dozen attendees, more or less evenly split between people involved in administering a program and recipients of the program's services. At the REM session held in Brooklyn Park, 38 persons attended the session representing two broad groups: 1) program staff/volunteers and 2) participants/community members. Attendees paired off with someone from the opposite category from them, preferably someone they did not know, and conducted short, semi-structured interviews with each another based on questions they had received from the session facilitator (Appendix B). Attendees were asked to write down their answers on the interview sheets. Questions asked during the interview asked participants to reflect on the successes, challenges, and unexpected results of the CEI from their personal experience.

After everyone had had a chance to interview and to be interviewed, the larger group reconvened and the evaluator facilitated a group discussion about their answers. As attendees shared their responses, the facilitator noted emergent themes aloud. During the session, the evaluator recorded each distinct piece of data in the mind mapping software XMind.<sup>TM</sup> This software allowed for the real-time merging of similar statements and ideas to build a web of the attendees' collective experiences. The attendees were asked to reflect on these emerging themes to inform the analysis. At the end of the session, attendees' notes were collected, and these were analyzed to further build up and organize the final ripple effect map (Appendix C).



## Results

### Themes

The themes that emerged in the final Ripple Effect Map (Appendix C) speak to a growing and changing city learning to engage with long-term and new residents, and a community of people who want to take pride in their city and in their neighbors.

Residents and initiative staff alike praised both specific victories, such as the planning



and execution of the new Diversity Fest, and broad cultural changes within the community that brought neighbors together who were beforehand unknown to each other.

Eight primary themes surfaced during the REM session and the individual interviews. Discussion of each of these themes follows, including illustrative quotes from the one-on-one interviews.

#### *Theme 1: Increased Sense of Pride in the City of Brooklyn Park*

During the REM session, one of the most common themes brought forward was that of an increased sense of pride in the City of Brooklyn Park. Residents are feel more pride in telling others that they live in Brooklyn Park and feel more invested in the city’s future. Several REM participants said that they go out of their way to tell people they live in Brooklyn Park, whereas before they were embarrassed. One attendee noted that s/he had planned to move from Brooklyn Park after retirement, but decided to stay after becoming involved in the CEI. A resident and volunteer interviewed stated “I found myself talking about Brooklyn Park completely differently to my friends in other cities”.

#### *Theme 2: Residents Felt Greater Empowerment*

Many attendees at the REM session mentioned ways that skills and knowledge they gained allowed them to navigate the community and the city government more easily and to be better advocates for themselves. Participants mentioned feeling more comfortable in City Hall, which led to a number of community organizations meeting there regularly since people were familiar with the building. Residents also mentioned





feeling better-equipped to navigate conflict and crises with their neighbors, citing the swift community response to an immediate need for youth services in their community that was made possible through the empowerment imparted by the CEI.

### *Theme 3: Greater Opportunities for Leadership Development*

Related to the theme of resident empowerment, another common theme was leadership development. Residents received trainings and had access to new opportunities through the CEI, which allowed them to become active leaders in the community. Participants at the CEI reported starting businesses and finding jobs in partner organizations with skills gained through the CEI. One attendee was hired to an important position in city government after participating in the CEI, and another attendee ran for city council! All of these credited the CEI in part for these opportunities.

### *Theme 4: Community Partnerships Formed and Strengthened*

Another positive theme of the REM session was the formation of partnerships that brought people and organizations together. Organizations and businesses across the city collaborated on CEI programs, and individuals that met through CEI participation brought organizations and resources together to contribute to accomplishments such as the Brooklyn Bridge Alliance that provides supportive services for youth in both Brooklyn Park and Brooklyn Center. The former Crime Prevention Coordinator for Brooklyn Park's police force stated that her department's work with the CEI "...allowed [her] to reach and gain the trust of new people" and approach crime prevention differently.

### *Theme 5: Individual Relationships Formed and Deepened*

Participants connected on an individual level as well, forming both friendships and professional relationships. REM participants reported getting to know their neighbors for the first time, connecting with people from other cultural groups in Brooklyn Park, and getting to know city staff and elected officials on a personal level. A former community engagement coordinator took great joy in telling the story of how she had hundreds of residents come to her wedding reception because of the relationships she had formed with the volunteers she recruited and managed.

### *Theme 6: Engagement Embedded in City of Brooklyn Park Culture*

Another theme that coalesced slowly but became very clear over the course of the REM session was a cultural shift in the way that the city of Brooklyn Park operates, with community engagement now embedded within many of what the city functions. Elected officials and city staff became more open to engaging with residents in the decision-



making process. One resident and CEI committee member appreciated this shift, saying “the reason I liked it so much was the city wanted involvement from the residents. They’d be like ‘Hey, you want to be involved in this? Here’s some power to do something’.” Residents also noted that the community-engaged visioning occurring now in the form of Brooklyn Park 2025 is only possible because of the culture shift that occurred as a result of CEI.

#### *Theme 7: Community Programs and Events Founded and Supported*

Most REM participants’ first thoughts about the CEI were of community events and volunteer programs, such as the annual Diversity Fest celebration, the New Connect welcome program for new Brooklyn Park residents, and the neighborhood-level events that formed as a result of the initiative to name neighborhoods in the city. These were the avenues through which many participants were introduced to, and engaged with, the CEI, as well as how many of the new friendships mentioned above began.

#### *Theme 8: Greater Understanding and Appreciation of Brooklyn Park’s Diversity*

In the midst of rapid demographic changes in the city, many interviewees and REM participants cited the CEI as a reason for increased understanding between the diverse cultural communities across Brooklyn Park. Residents got to know residents of other neighborhoods and members of the city’s cultural and immigrant communities through events and by working alongside them on CEI projects. One former staff member stated that “for many people, Diversity Fest was their first chance to learn about, for example, Liberian culture”.

#### **By the Numbers**

A review of CEI documents conveys a similar story. In the five years of the CEI, the initiative met its original goals of at least ninety percent of residents surveyed feeling proud to live in Brooklyn Park (91%), feeling that it is a thriving community (92%), and feeling that they have the opportunity to succeed (91%). Documents also showed that roughly eighty city staff and community members served on the initiative’s committees at any given time. Volunteers across the city organized events, delivered welcome packages, and represented the initiative around the city. CEI-related events occurred frequently in all years. In 2015, for example, 62 CEI-related events were held and over 5,300 people attended them.



## Challenges

Although the successes noted by interviewees and REM attendees clearly indicated a strong and impactful CEI, three challenges related to staff turnover, volunteer responsibilities, and funding surfaced during data collection.

First, turnover among city staff, both those working with the CEI directly and those supporting its work, was believed to impact the initiative's effectiveness. Over the five-year period, the city experienced the loss of a city planner, a community engagement coordinator, and a community relations coordinator that worked with the program directly. The shifts in the initiative that inevitably resulted from having new leadership led some participants to report changes in the direction of the initiative that were not always perceived to have been well-communicated.

Second, a couple of CEI volunteers stated during the interview process that their role in planning events diminished over time. For example, one interviewee noted that while s/he had actively planned an event in its first year, s/he was asked to only volunteer time in subsequent years. This resulted, at times, in feeling that they were under-utilized after their role in planning events shifted. Relatedly, CEI staff noted that it had become more challenging to coordinate the growing list of volunteers as the Community Engagement team was responsible for managing greater numbers of events and initiatives.

Finally, a concern was expressed that because the impacts of community engagement were sometimes difficult to quantify, funding for these programs and activities may not be consistent over time. Though Brooklyn Park elected officials, particularly the late Mayor Steve Lampi, have been supportive of the CEI, continuing to raise awareness of the positive impacts of community engagement is needed.



## Recommendations

Interview subjects and REM attendees shared their thoughts on what made the CEI successful and the challenges that it faced. Based on these, the City of Brooklyn Park may consider the following recommendations to improve future community engagement efforts:

### *Recommendation 1: Use a similar planning process for future community engagement efforts*

The planning process used as part of the CEI was seen as a major success. The intentionality with which a diverse and passionate team was selected ensured that Planning Team members brought unique expertise and perspectives, and gave residents a significant voice in the process. At the same time, outside facilitation of the initial strategic planning meeting and the use of a consensus model allowed for these unique perspectives to compliment, rather than divide, each other. The city may consider utilizing a similar recruitment and facilitation process in future planning endeavors, especially those that give a significant voice to Brooklyn Park residents.

### *Recommendation 2. Ensure sufficient funding of community engagement efforts*

Providing adequate financial support is crucial to ensuring the viability and success of community engagement efforts. As the work of the Community Engagement team expands, funding for the engagement activities within the department and throughout the city should be increased appropriately. Future engagement efforts would benefit from providing ample funding of engagement teams or taskforces, *as well as* funding for a broader range of departments to conduct engagement activities rather than relying on a small number of individuals to carry out such activities.

### *Recommendation 3. Foster a culture of engagement*

The city should do all it can to continue to foster a culture of engagement across departments. While funding is critical, the city should look for other ways to celebrate and reward examples of good community engagement, such as incentivizing departments to utilize community engagement principles in their work, and recognizing programs, staff members, and projects that do this well. Engagement should also be



modeled at the highest levels of power, with elected officials and high-level city staff engaging the community whenever possible. This would help further embed the culture of engagement into the way the city functions.

*Recommendation 4. Hire a volunteer coordinator*

A challenge cited by both staff and volunteers was related to volunteer support and management. The current model places a high burden on existing staff, who must manage the city's hundreds of volunteers for CEI programs in between other duties. This stress is also felt by volunteers, some of whom expressed that they felt less connected to the program after the staff member who specialized in volunteer management left the city for another position. While the volunteer base for the initiative and its related programs is broad and enthusiastic, the city could benefit from a more organized and consistent system for engaging and mobilizing volunteers. For these reasons, the city should consider hiring a volunteer coordinator to relieve the burden this role places on existing staff and to better maintain volunteer engagement.

*Recommendation 5. Engage meaningfully throughout the decision-making process*

The successes of the CEI demonstrates a clear need to maintain opportunities for residents to engage at a meaningful level in the city's decision-making process. Although often a challenge to empower residents with meaningful decision-making authority, doing so provides a greater sense of community pride and higher levels of engagement. Through the CEI, Brooklyn Park residents have had a chance to influence city decisions about major public events, city services, and the names of their own neighborhoods. The city should continue to take every opportunity to engage residents meaningfully and at multiple stages of the decision-making process.



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## Appendix A: Individual Interview Guide

1. Briefly describe your involvement with the CEI.
  - a. When did you become involved?
  - b. What was your role in the program?
  - c. How long were you involved?
2. In your understanding, what was the series of events that led to the creation of the CEI?
  - a. Who were the primary champions?
3. What are the social, cultural, and economic features of the Brooklyn Park community that created the need and opportunity for the CEI?
4. How was the program initially received by community members? How has that changed over time?
5. In what ways has the program been a success? In what ways has it not?
  - a. In your opinion what are the key aspects of the program that have made it successful/not successful?
6. Has anything happened in the program, or as a result of it, that you did not expect?
7. Tell me about the structure of the CEI in terms of staff, volunteers, and participants.
  - a. How has this changed over time?
  - b. What parts of the structure worked? What didn't?
8. What goes on behind the scenes that community members don't see?
9. How do you feel about the city government's support of the program?
10. Knowing what you know now, is there anything you would change about forming or implementing the CEI if you could do it over again?
  - a. Do you have any advice for other cities that considering implementing a community engagement program?
11. Do you mind if I follow up with you in the future if I have further questions?



## Appendix B: Ripple Effect Mapping Interview Guide

What is a highlight, achievement, or success you had based on your involvement with the Community Engagement Initiative (CEI)? What did this achievement lead to?

What new or deepened connections with others (individuals, communities, organizations, educational institutions, government, philanthropic) have you made as a result of your involvement with the CEI? What did these connections lead to?

What unexpected things have happened as a result of your involvement with the CEI?

What, if anything, has been difficult about your involvement with CEI? What has grown out of that experience?





## Appendix C: Ripple Effect Map

