TOP 10 Lessons Learned from Redwood City Community Building Activities

Through our experience in the concepts and tools of Community Building, we've learned...

• ...to trust what our community is telling us – we go to great lengths to be truthful in soliciting and accepting community involvement and input, even if critical of our programs or actions; we provide clear and concise information, and always maintain candor with our community members to gain a high level of mutual trust.

• ...that you can't build community without believing in and embracing the concepts and the value of helping people connect with the City and with each other. The commitment to working on community building must exist at the city council and upper management level, and be widely endorsed and embraced throughout the organization.

• ...to let go! We don't always have an “end-product” or “desired outcome” identified; often, the dialog itself is the outcome. It's a process, not just a project, and it can be a long, slow process at that – it doesn’t take place in the fast lane - with stops and starts, and changing directions; allow for and accept a high degree of ambiguity.

• ...that community building must become a way of doing the City’s business. We’ve made it an everyday part of our culture, and our philosophy. And with that comes a need for flexibility, determination, and a long-term commitment.

• ...that measuring results is not as important as knowing that you’ve done the work of bringing people together, and helping them to make community connections.

• ...to make sure that the nuts-and-bolts logistics are well-handled, in order to place a high level of attention on the content and substance of the community building process.

• ...that it’s important to follow up with every community member that participated, and develop a means of maintaining contact and renewing the community connection that you’re trying to nurture.

• ...the value of bringing all viewpoints to the table – we don’t look at differing viewpoints as bad or wrong, just as new ideas we haven’t yet considered. We know that the more diversity we have in the room, the more creativity we have in community problem solving.

• ...to bring businesses and other partnerships into the process of community building – either by getting grants, or utilizing other agencies’ skills, or creating events involving businesses. It helps to offset the costs, and also fully involves these important members of our community – which are, after all, made up of individuals who are themselves part of our community.
• …to keep a sense of humor and we use that to share the excitement and enthusiasm of working to build a great community together.
10 Things to do to Engage your Community

"You must be the change you want to see in the world." –Gandhi

1. Start with building relationships, among citizens. Community is founded on the bedrock of relationships.

2. Neighbors must get to know each other and develop relationships. Encourage them and provide incentives for them to get together.

3. Citizens must understand and accept that they are responsible and accountable for the quality of life of their community, as much as, if not more than their city government.

4. Citizens will engage around things they are passionate about and things that further their dreams and hopes for their neighborhood/city.

5. People will engage with each other, most easily around food. Always try to start off gatherings with food.

6. Like a muscle, our ability to be civically engaged has atrophied so it is important that the city act as a catalyst to help redevelop that skill.

7. A community is an “Association of Associations. “ One objective of the city is to weave/web together the existing small communities in our city: (church groups, service clubs, sports groups, mother’s clubs, PTA etc.)

8. Community Building/Civic Engagement takes time. It is important for people to talk and listen to each other about their dreams and hopes and not to immediately jump to solution and problem solving.

9. Agreement and understanding is easy to achieve when people talk about their dreams, hopes and potential for their city. Get people to connect there first as it is easy to disagree and fight about the “How.”

10. Community Building and Civic Engagement start small oftentimes with one individual, talking to two others.

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed people can change the world: indeed it is the only thing that ever has.” -Margaret Mead

Ed Everett
City Manager
City of Redwood City
Redwood City's Core Purpose: "To Build a Great Community Together."

Redwood City's community building efforts all started some years ago, when City Manager Ed Everett convened a large group of employees from across the entire range and scope of the City operation and asked the basic question, *"Why does Redwood City exist?"* Other than the legal requirement that we are an entity of the state, what is our core purpose for doing what we do? This started an intensive, multi-day, multi-session discussion on what Redwood City really wanted to be – from both a pragmatic and a more philosophical standpoint. Is Redwood City merely ten services/businesses/departments under the umbrella of the city name, or is there something that ties all these departments together, on a deeper and more meaningful level?

The culmination of these discussions with City employees led to the conclusion that the reason Redwood City exists is *"To Build a Great Community Together"* - hence the birth of our Core Purpose. This was the genesis of Redwood City's community building process.

**PACT**

Once Redwood City had defined its core purpose, we started to look for programs, activities, or events that would serve to share this core purpose with the members of the community. One of our first efforts was PACT (Partnership Academy for Community Teamwork).

PACT is a “citizens academy,” but one that is unlike almost all others. The basic model was to get residents to come together, have dinner with City staff and each other (emphasizing the importance and community tradition of “breaking bread” together), get to know one another, and get to know the City. The participants (an average of approximately 35) spend nine evenings together, from 6 pm to 9 pm, learning about every City department, and the importance of building community. They do not learn from the City Council, or the City Manager, or the department heads. They learn about the City by talking directly with the very staff members who perform the City services. We have put on eight such series.

**Outcomes:**

1. This program radically changed the stereotypes that many resident hold about government employees. Participants were amazed at the dedication, professionalism, and innovation of “their” city employees.
2. The participants developed great pride in their city.
3. By the end of the program, the residents had often bonded as a group and made lasting relationships, which is the basis of building community.
4. One participant might have summed it up best by telling a story. When asked what had changed for her after participating, she said that at the end of the day, she is no
longer just driving back to where she lives, in Redwood City; rather now, at the end of the day, she is driving HOME.

Community Builders Speakers Series

Folks who completed the PACT series were inspired, excited, and engaged – and they kept asking, “What's next?” Early on, there was no “next,” so after some research and deliberation, the city manager's office decided to put on a series of sessions and workshops, focused specifically on the importance of and how to “build community.” We did this by inviting nationally-known speakers (Peter Block, John McKnight, Meg Wheatley, Juanita Brown, and Angeles Arrien) to share their vast and diverse experience with community building concepts and tools.

As in PACT, participants attended a series of six evening sessions from 6pm to 9pm. We served dinner (again stressing the importance of breaking bread together), thus providing that all-important period for people to sit with folks they don’t necessarily know, spend social time together, get to know others in their community, chat about what community building means to them, share their perspectives, and simply talk about things they could do to enhance their communities. Then, the invigorating and worldwide perspectives and lessons from our speakers brought the participants together around how to build community.

Over the course of three years, we put on three such community building speakers series, with about 80-100 residents in each series – the final series included representatives from two nearby cities that were interested in learning about our community building efforts and how they might translate to another city.

Outcomes:

1. Participants were very impressed that the City would actually focus on the importance of building community.
2. Some smaller groups spun off to work on their own projects (community garden, neighborhood traffic, and bike and pedestrian safety).
3. We raised the consciousness of people regarding the importance of building community and gave them ideas and tools for how they can build community right in their own neighborhoods.

Gang Violence Meetings

At one point, Redwood City experienced an unusual outbreak of gang shootings. Staff took the initiative to go out into the neighborhoods and, using our community building model, bring neighbors together with each other and with the City to talk about this critical issue. Again, we fed them dinner (and provided child care to remove that possible obstacle to attendance), and sat them at tables of ten to get to know each other. We then fostered discussions at the tables and as a large group about what the neighbors could do, in partnership with the City, to reduce gang violence and protect their children. The Police Department provided detailed and professional information on gangs, gang markings, and gang colors so that parents could recognize the signs in their own children. We discussed with them what the City was trying to do with our resources and the importance of working together and helping each other in addressing gang violence.
Through this process, the people at the tables began to commit to what they could each do on a neighborhood basis. The City also facilitated the participation of a large grouping of non-profit resource agencies for neighbors to visit, gather information, and make connections. These resources ranged from the Peninsula Conflict Resolution Center to the Police Activities League, from school districts to youth mentoring organizations, and from the City's code enforcement group to neighborhood associations. We held four workshops in different neighborhoods, with about 40 to 50 folks at each meeting.

Outcomes:

1. People saw and appreciated what the City was already doing to address gang violence.
2. Parents learned how to recognize potential gang activity within their own families.
3. People learned that there are things they can do to help, and many committed to work with the police department, versus being afraid to call the police - a small but important step, especially for some of our more recent immigrants.

**Recycled Water Project**

What started out as a fairly straight-forward engineering project to provide recycled water for irrigation so the City could reduce its water usage almost turned into a community disaster.

The City was clearly facing a future water shortage and had decided that recycled water (along with aggressive conservation) was a key component of the solution, and we were ready to embark on a large-scale program to bring its use to various areas of the City. However, in the Internet age it takes just one person, panicked about a perceived significant health risk of recycled water, and who could work the Internet 24/7, to transform the process into a great controversy. This person had substantial negative impact on the community's acceptance of a recycle water program.

We soon realized that a segment of our community was becoming vehemently opposed to certain proposed uses of recycled water - their fear was that children would get sick or die by playing on turf irrigated with recycled water. All available credible scientific evidence strongly discounted this as an unfounded fear. However, the fact remains the issue was splitting our community.

The City stepped back and determined to take an unusual, collaborative course to attempt to resolve the issue. We formed a citizen task force made up of ten residents in favor of recycled water and ten opposed to the use of recycled water. Their charge was to develop a water-saving plan, incorporating the use of recycled water, which would conserve the full amount of water that the City's original program was intended to conserve, and under the same budget constraints. We provided the group with a professional facilitator, a budget to hire their own expert, and a timeframe to come up with an alternative to the City's original program. They were also told that if they couldn't come up with a strong consensus around a new plan, the City would proceed with its original proposed plan.

After initial distrust and extreme cautiousness, the task force proceeded and ended up being a complete and thorough success.
Outcomes:

1. After six months of hard work, the task force came back with a 100% consensus recommendation and program which the City Council unanimously endorsed.
2. The task force met the goals of saving sufficient water, staying with budget constraints, and developing a program that brought the community together.
3. The task force, after their recommendations were endorsed, continued to get together to have a celebration dinner, once a year. This community-building by-product has continued for several years.
4. The city council completely endorsed the task forces’ recommendations and we have built about 70% of the infrastructure without any community opposition.

Trees in Redwood City

We used the same approach that we used in recycled water on the issues of trees to resolve the conflict between citizens who saw the problem based on very different values. Some residents believe that a homeowner should be able to do what he/she wants to do with trees on their property while some residents hold a different value that an urban forest is very important to the community and as such there must be regulations on homeowners regarding trees on their property. This task force also came to a near unanimous set of recommendations that the council has adopted.

Neighborhood Traffic Solutions

Among most city councils and all city staff, it’s well-known that every resident in their city is a traffic expert! At least they think they are… Almost every person wants a stop sign put on the corner nearest where they live. However, they then are quick to complain that they can’t drive around the city because there are too many stop signs.

Using our model of community building, our City staff began working with one neighborhood in particular (McGarvey Avenue). We engaged the residents differently at this particular location. First, we met with residents at a location of their choosing in their own neighborhood, in a workshop format. The neighborhood group itself was given responsibility for securing the location, handling logistics, and helping to notify neighbors. The meetings were professionally facilitated by third-party neutral facilitators - there was no City traffic expert telling them what they would or could not do. The City opened its books and provided all the data it had regarding speeding, collisions, etc., on that street.

What we made clear to the residents was that the City alone cannot solve the speeding problem, that the only way to accomplish the change would be in partnership with the people in the neighborhood. The City was prepared to try some new approaches (i.e. roundabouts, and traffic chokers at intersections) in this area, but only with the understanding that the residents would be prepared to take on some tasks as well. This aspect of both the City and the residents accepting mutual responsibility for resolving an issue is a hallmark of our community building efforts.

Outcomes:

1. The City agreed to experiment with roundabouts, traffic chokers, and stop signs (at locations which didn’t meet engineering standards for requiring stop signs) if and only if the neighbors could obtain the necessary support of the residents immediately.
affected by these experiments (i.e. those at and near the intersections where measures would be installed). The City provided them with the criteria as to the necessary levels of support that would be needed to move forward with certain group recommendation.

2. The Police department trained some residents on the use of a radar speed gun, and loaned them one for their own use. When resident volunteers detected that cars were going over the speed limit, the license plate numbers were noted. The neighborhood group and City staff collaborated in writing a friendly reminder letter that was sent by the Police department to the owners of the speeding cars. The letter politely requested that community members not drive through their neighborhood at high speeds, as this endangered their children, their pets, and the parked cars.

3. The neighbors have been satisfied with the City’s efforts, and view the initial results as a good starting point for further collaborative work.

Climate Protection Workshop

Redwood City used one of its community building models, "The World Café," to discuss with community members what they could do to make a difference in global warming. We had over 90 people attend, and had a strong collaborative discussion, including work to get commitments from participants to implement just one small thing in this area, as a starting point.

Neighborhood Liaisons

The City has realized that our next step was to take community building to the block level, one block at a time until the effort reaches the “tipping point within the city.” Every resident who attended a PACT class, a community building series, a neighborhood traffic program, the gang series, the global warming workshop, or other community building activity was designated as a Neighborhood Liaison for his/her block or grouping of homes.

The purpose of this program is to get a commitment from somebody on the block to simply act as a catalyst to bring the neighbors of that block together, to get to know one another, and to act as a conduit for information and action between the City and the neighbors. We’ve learned that it’s often difficult for even a gregarious neighbor to just go out and knock on their neighbor’s doors, in a sort of “cold call” manner - they may have lived next door to that neighbor for multiple years and yet don’t know them. Instead, we have offered three specific task options for each Neighborhood Liaison to work on, if they so choose, as a succinct reason or motivation for visiting neighbors they may not know.

The three tasks we have asked them to consider working on are: 1) disaster preparedness on their block, 2) reducing the carbon footprint on their block and 3) getting their neighbors together in some social way, such as a block party, pot luck, community event, or other project.

We know by giving them a task they are much more likely to go out and knock on their neighbors’ doors, and there’s a higher likelihood of their neighbor agreeing to help them in one of these tasks, and thereby get neighbors to meet other neighbors. Building a community always starts with neighbors knowing each other.

This program is in its infancy, as the City Council only recently appropriated to it some funding. The City Manager’s office will use those funds to hire an individual to work directly with these Neighborhood Liaisons to in facilitating their work in one or more of these task areas. In the interim, City staff has already successfully worked with over 30 Neighborhood Liaisons to help
them with setting up small neighborhood events focused around giving away compact fluorescent light (CFL) bulbs and energy-saving information, as part of a larger state-wide program. This has served very well to help connect neighbors with neighbors – even those that may not know each other - around a specific issue.

**Community Building Grants**

The City has also established a program of “Community Building Grants.” It consists of just a small grant of $300 to help cover the cost of any community building event or activity, i.e., a block party, creating neighborhood disaster kits, a pot luck dinner to welcome new neighbors, neighborhood beautification or repair projects, or anything that brings the neighbors together. This grant requires nothing more than a short application, and gets approved by the City Manager’s Department.

**Community Workshop Focused on Our Youth**

On September 14th, 2007, the Redwood City community initiated it’s first-ever series of community workshop discussions, focused solely on our youth. We recognize that youth are consistently the most left-out group of any community, and that there is a great need to get the adults of our community talking collectively about “Our Youth” and not about “Those Kids.”

The demographic data shows that two thirds of the households in Redwood City do not include a school-age youth, a statistic which contributes to the apparent lack of understanding between youth and adults. So, as a starting point, Redwood City has started to examine that gap in understanding between our adults and our youth, through this groundbreaking “Bridge to a Better Community – Youth and Adults Working Together” activity. Nearly 200 community members showed up, 40% youth and 60% adults, for this extremely thought-provoking, inspiring, and engaging discussion. We envision this as the first of a series of discussions, with the later meetings revolving around specific subjects that have been identified by our youth as being important to them, and to their current and future roles in our community. Youth are the future of our Community Building efforts.

Outcomes:

1. We did “instant polling” at the initial meeting to gain a quick overview of a few of the interesting differences and similarities in some of the youth and adult perspectives.
2. Youth were active planners and implementers of the event.
3. We asked participant to drop “interest cards” into a bucket next to the particular topic they were passionate about and willing to work on.
4. This event occurred very recently, and we have just scheduled a follow up workshop to more closely examine the key topic areas that were identified.

**Physical Planning for a Community**

Community building is not just about programs, although they are of course of critical importance. A community is strongly affected, both positively and negatively, by the City’s planning codes, zoning ordinances, and land-use decisions. Redwood City felt that as part of ”Building a Great Community Together”, we needed to have an active downtown. Every community needs a place to congregate. There has to be a “there” where people are comfortable, a physical space where they can feel the spirit of the community.
So Redwood City has invested over $50 million in completely renovating our downtown. We have built a magnificent public plaza, the Courthouse Square, where there was none. We rejuvenated our downtown that was dead; we have created a "Living Room" for our community. The City sponsors programs in the Courthouse Square, so that during the warm months there is frequently something happening that draws people together: Wednesday night - free outdoor movies; Thursday night - free dance lessons; Friday night - free concert; Saturdays - fun family entertainment; and music on the square during weekday lunchtimes. Additionally, the Courthouse Square and other downtown sites serve as the focal point for a variety of very well-attended seasonal festivals and activities.

Redwood City has just completed a very progressive, forward-thinking Downtown Precise Plan for the community. It allows for buildings up to 12 stories in the center of downtown, and then incrementally moving it down to 10 stories, eight stories, five stories, and finally three stories on the edges next to our neighborhoods. This plan does not set a density limits. After years of talking with our community about our Downtown Plan it was adopted with nary a negative comment from the community at its last public hearing.

Outcomes:

1. The Redwood City community has become excited about and wholly endorses the concept of the Courthouse Square as a community meeting space. They are using it.
2. There is now a special buzz about downtown Redwood City that has brought pride to the residents of Redwood City – and that buzz is extending beyond our borders to other communities.
3. Multiple developers are now looking at assembling entire city blocks, so as to build out the downtown to match the vision of the citizens, a clear indication that there is faith in the future of our downtown and our downtown community.

City Departments are Incorporating Community Building

Almost all of our City departments are doing things that build community. They have wholeheartedly endorsed the concept that one of their key, ongoing tasks is to build community. Some examples:

1. **Fire Department:** sponsored a fund-raising dinner for a family whose daughter had brain cancer. The community turned out and raised over $60,000 for the family. 90% of the community members who came did not know this little girl, but they did know this girl was part of our community, and she and her family needed help.

2. **Library:** Unlike most libraries that ordered eight or ten copies of the last Harry Potter book, our library ordered 300 copies and had an all-night party for some 400 to 500 kids and their parents. At midnight, more than 300 copies of the books were loaned out. It was a marvelous community building event for parents and their young children.

Another Library-initiated community event was the “One Book – One Community” program, followed a year later by “The Big Read.” Both of these activities brought the community together around reading and literacy. The “One Book-One Community” program selected the classic-to-be book *The Kite Runner*, and encouraged everyone in the community – young and old, English and Spanish speaking, from all walks of life – to read the book during the same time period, and then participate in book discussions, events, activities, presentations, and various other book-related events.
Building on that success, the Redwood City Library partnered with Montalvo Arts Center to be part of the nationwide “The Big Read” during which Ray Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451 was the featured book. Nearly 50 events and activities surrounded the community-wide reading of this book, involving hundreds of residents from throughout the community.

3. **Police Department**: regularly sponsors a Blues Festival and a Comedy Night for the community to raise money for the Police Activities League, which helps our community’s youth. The community turns out in mass to support our kids through these events, as well as numerous other smaller events that the police department sponsors.

4. **Public Works Services**: got the community involved in water conservation in a big way, from do-it-yourself in-home water saving ideas, to education programs in the schools, to business water-use audits, to a multi-year toilet giveaway program. In fact we have given away 10,000 toilets and are already conserving millions upon millions of gallons of water. Through these and other efforts, the community has come together around the issue of water conservation.

5. **Parks, Recreation and Community Services**: almost everything they do and all of their programs help build community! And they take it a step further by thoroughly involving and engaging the community in their planning processes, such as their strategic plan, and the design of a new skate park.

Note: I suggest deleting the Sequoia Awards paragraph, unless we have at least two or three other community-based activities to fill out this section. Otherwise, it seems like just too little to illustrate the community’s effort.

**Summary**

There is a pervasive buzz in Redwood City about our focus and action on community building. Many residents have participated in a community building event, and most residents have heard that this is a concept the City is pushing. It all started when we began to focus on our core purpose: “Build a Great Community Together.” We have been doing this with our residents over the last six years.

If Redwood City is able to continue its razor-sharp focus on building community, we will soon reach the “tipping point” and when that happens, Redwood City will become known as the City that Built a Community - and in return it will be the most sought-after community in which to live and work in the entire Bay Area.