

Strategic Planning Committee  
Community Relations Working Group

July 7, 2014 Meeting Minutes  
Hammond 314 @ 10:30am

Committee Attendees: Elizabeth Walsh, Chair, Nicholas Capasso, Robert Carr, Christopher Hendry, Daniel LaFond, Jannette McMenamy, Renée Scapparone, Joshua Spero. Absentees: Jessica Augat, Karen Leary, Megan Pierce

Guests: Jay Bry, John Chetro-Szivos, William Cummings, Marc Dohan, Jane Fiske, Michael Kushmerek, Paul Weizer

Meeting called to order at 10:35am

Minutes of the June 23<sup>rd</sup> meeting were reviewed; motion to accept by Renée Scapparone and seconded by Robert Carr; unanimously approved.

Discussions:

- Elizabeth Walsh (Chair) distributed attendance sheets for both the July 7<sup>th</sup> meeting to be signed by all committee members in attendance for the meeting.
- Invited guest, Marc Dohan, Executive Director of the Twin Cities Community Development Corporation (CDC) presented a brief history of the CDC:
  - Originally known as the Cleghorn Neighborhood Development Center and became the Twin Cities CDC when (approximately 10 years ago) relocated the organization to where it currently operates at 470 Main Street. The move to downtown was to help improve not only the building but also the neighborhood on Main Street with market-rate (affordable) housing.
  - The next targeted area was Elm Street where the CDC felt they could make an impact and started with the purchase and demolition of 3 vacant garages on the corner of Elm and Johnson Streets; which were then developed into 8 parcels of saleable affordable housing. Struggling through the economic recession, the CDC was pressured by HUD to build, the CDC took a loss on the sale of the 1<sup>st</sup> home. The focus shifted to the development of 31 apartments on Main Street.
  - In order to be successful with homeownership and affordable housing, the CDC worked closely with the neighbors in their needs. Monthly meetings were held within walking distance for the neighbors, on average 20 to 30 people attended these meetings and was strongly supported by Police Chief Robert DeMoura who attend ALL meetings.

- A grass-roots approach was taken by literally knocking on 700 doors in the neighborhood and individual meetings were held for the specific audience members (i.e. landowners only, building owners only, tenants only, businesses only, and Spanish speaking residents only).
- What evolved was a Neighborhood Action Plan that addressed public safety, new sidewalks, repaving of roads, and housing (the CDC's specialty). Neighbors expressed that they wanted to have "fun" in their neighborhood and not just a place to live; what transpired were neighborhood events (i.e. Trick or Treat on Elm).
- Other needs arose and more partners were needed; this led the CDC to become one of the four partners in the Working Cities Grant; along with FSU, Montachusett Opportunity Council (MOC) and the City of Fitchburg. John Chetro-Szivos stated that this a highly functional collaboration and will have a collective impact.
- Marc Dohan provided an explanation of the Working Cities Grant (monies provided by the Federal Reserve to Gateway Cities). The grant is for \$400K for a 3 year period that will measure the results from the initiative investment that will focus on six key areas: health, education, public safety, economic development, community engagement, and housing in the designated North of Main Street neighborhoods.
  - At the onset of the grant, the Working Cities partners conducted a survey of 200 households in the targeted area. The results showed that 70% felt good about the neighborhood and 65% would recommend to a friend. Results from the survey will be provided to the committee.
  - The partners are currently holding 'visioning sessions' with the neighborhood residents to address what they feel are the assets of the neighborhood, what should be changed, and what can they do personally.
  - Students from the FSU Nursing program have expressed an interest in conducting a survey to address the health concerns such as why there are higher rates of diabetes and asthma in this neighborhood.
  - Students in Dr. Scapparone's Management class will be working with the partners in the fall to help with the project management of the walkability (WIN) project in this neighborhood. This is in response to the residents' requests for cleanliness and safety in their neighborhood.
  - Mr. Dohan commented that not everyone wants to have neighbors right next door, but those that choose to live in neighborhood like North of Main do not mind the close neighbor and therefore should be engage to feel this sense of community. Also, some of these residents are willing and wanting change, while others (more so the elderly long-time residents) are not so comfortable with being outside of their dwellings. There is a need to help these people with the emotional issues that evolve from

changes taking place; a definite need for neighborhood meetings so that they can get to know their neighbors and not be afraid.

- The question was asked what the receptiveness was of other organizations like FSU, the police, and other non-profits in this neighborhood. Mr. Dohan stated that there is no particular strategy to do outreach, just so long as there is one; one that considers the culture (values and beliefs) of these residents. Also by addressing market-rate [affordable] housing, education and health issues is a great platform for implementation.
- Also asked was the question as to how FSU could start the communication process with these residents. Mr. Dohan replied that we must use the 80/20 rule in that 80% of our efforts will result in helping 20% of the benefactors. Our efforts should be spent with the tenants and not so much on the landowners, landlords, or businesses. We also need to focus on the Latino population in this neighborhood and keep in mind the language barrier and that many are not accustomed to attending meetings.
- Mr. Dohan stated that in order to persuade investors into these neighborhoods, whether these are landowners, building owners, or tenants, they must be convinced that this is a good place. According to the Boston Warren Group study, desirable places should show population growth and an increase in real estate prices. Also considered, but are debatable, are employment rates and number of vacancies. One study has shown the City of Fitchburg as losing “value”.
- Mr. Dohan recommended that FSU needs to make investments that expect larger returns; we need to take a look at “how we are investing” and “what do we think the return should be in the long term”. This should be reflected in internships, neighborhood development, community partnerships and grants. FSU has the size, and the resources to back these investments, unlike the CDC who has a much smaller budget and only 10 people on staff. Mr. Dohan noted that although FSU can do most projects on their own, the university needs to learn how to partner with other organizations.
- Also recommended was for FSU to take a role in the Working Cities Grant that makes the university “special”, offering something that is more desirable – he sees a good fit with offering free education to the students who reside in the targeted neighborhoods. Also, FSU could assist with more capital issues such as deferred maintenance: helping to renovate or demolish (and rebuild) old homes on Highland, Myrtle, North and surrounding streets. FSU needs to invest with other agencies such as MOC, LUK, and the Museum (to name a few).
- FSU should invest in providing paid internships to conduct surveys. In the past survey conducted by the CDC, the CDC paid FSU students \$10 per hour, provided training, food (pizza) and shirts. Mr. Dohan stated that he would like to see more internships from FSU within his organization.

- Elizabeth Walsh (chair) commented that currently FSU internships are ad hoc and that there should be a concerted effort campus-wide to coordinate the needs of business and non-profit organizations seeking interns, which interns are in place and where. Comments were made that this a “selling point” during open houses and all recruiting efforts.
- There is a need for another market study to be conducted to identify whether the arts have an impact on the Fitchburg economy, especially in the neighborhoods surrounding the university. The CDC could use the assistance of FSU resources, such as (but not limited to) financial, faculty, students, REDI and GIS technology to help collect data on education and health issues, and to gain a better understanding of the ownership and poverty rates. The CDC would like to see FSU commit to a loan fund.
- Mr. Dohan strongly recommended that since FSU shares the same “F” as in as that Fitchburg, together must help to change the image as a whole. FSU should not be so secretive with its efforts, for example should publicize its positive role in the public school system (McKay Elementary). Mr. Dohan also recommended that FSU “name” the surrounding neighborhood to help improve the image and to help market the area.
- Also recommended partnerships with other agencies, investing (even through internships) should be part of the FSU strategic goals. Working closely with other agencies will help them to build capacity. Also suggesting FSU would be more successful in the receptiveness of the university’s outreach efforts if another agency other than FSU conducted opinion surveys.

***ACTION ITEMS:***

- Elizabeth Walsh will contact Marc Dohan and John Chetro-Szivos to obtain the results from the survey conducted for the Working Cities Grant.
- Elizabeth Walsh will post a doodle message to identify the best dates for the committee’s meetings in September.

*Next Meeting:* Monday, July 21, 2014 @ 10:30am in Hammond 314

Meeting adjournment at 11:50am

Respectfully submitted by,  
Renée Scapparone