

COMMENTARY

The Importance of Communication in Collaborative Community Development: Lessons Learned from Three Cases

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ABSTRACT

Collaborative community development projects aimed at promoting economic vitality, with attendant consequences as a key social determinant of health, necessarily pose questions about how to best communicate between developers, project partners, and community members. Many such projects are taking place across the United States, including in Ohio. This commentary draws on examples from 3 communities (2 outside of our state of Ohio, and another in the Linden neighborhood of Columbus, Ohio) to distill 3 key lessons in the area of communication. First, we argue that communication should be proactive, not reactive. Second, we explain why planners should be consistent in the provision of updates related to progress or lack thereof in real time on websites and apps, all while ensuring that information remains current. Third, though communication remains an under-appreciated aspect of partnership-based community development work, including explicitly health-oriented work, we argue that communicating progress to community members is not only logistically important, but part of a broader effort to build trust within communities in order to create long-lasting and sustainable change. This trust, after all, is a necessary foundation for community-focused work concerned with addressing the social determinants of health.

Keywords: Community development; Communication; Trust; Housing

INTRODUCTION

Despite many moving parts and the involvement of multiple entities, collaborative community development projects aimed at improving health within communities are often introduced as carefully-planned, structured, and multiphased undertakings. Across Ohio, such projects are being carried out, led by individual organizations as well as small and large collaboratives. For example, a collaborative in Miamisburg, Ohio, known as Miamisburg CARES (Community Action for Revitalization, Engagement, and Sustainability), targets building and housing stock, infrastructure, and quality of life in their efforts.¹ Collaborative projects are being carried out in larger cities as well, as in the case of the Buckeye neighborhood in Cleveland, Ohio, where the main focus is to revitalize housing and prevent displacement of Black residents.² University Circle, an area less than 15 minutes from Buckeye, has

been the focus of a much larger development collaborative, with the involvement of many partners and the local community, planning and completing varying types of projects over a longer period of time.³

No matter how well-planned, however, these logistically complex projects are accompanied by challenges. Stakeholders, especially local residents, may reasonably expect not only that the progress of these projects will be tracked and assessed in a coherent, organized, and transparent manner, but also that such progress is communicated effectively to the community staked in its success.⁴

We are a team of health researchers and medical students who, since 2020, have been studying a community development project in Central Ohio in which a children's hospital has played a collaborative role. This commentary uses an examination of publicly





available accounts of 2 community development projects outside of Ohio (1 in Michigan and 1 New Jersey). These cases, roughly comparable in scope and aim, were chosen to allow for reflection on the challenges and progress of the collaborative project addressing health disparities and other needs in the Linden neighborhood of Ohio's capital city, Columbus. Differences in state locale allowed for reassurance that cases were not shaped by state-level policy dynamics, and set the stage for gaining a better understanding and learning from opportunities and challenges experienced in the varied locations.

We believe that our analysis may prove helpful to community development experts, municipal planners, and administrators such as project managers at organizations involved in collaborative development projects that identify the improvement of health outcomes as key aims. While by no means exhaustive, and with the caveat that each project is unique, these examples provide opportunities for understanding both the aims and challenges of community development plans, especially insofar as they are able to earn and maintain community trust.

Case 1: Fitzgerald—Detroit, Michigan

Despite possessing assets that could be leveraged for real opportunity, the Detroit neighborhood of Fitzgerald has long grappled with widespread blight, crime, and poverty. Its median household income is about \$3500 lower than Detroit's, and its crime index is 4 times higher than national averages.⁵ Amidst a 2017 mayoral race, a \$12 million revitalization plan for the neighborhood was announced with a projected completion of fall of 2019. The project was initially led by the City of Detroit, but was to be carried out in collaboration with real estate developers under the name of 'Fitz Forward.'⁶ The plan's aim was to "repurpose ten acres of dispersed city-owned vacant land" and to "make life better" through the creation of new opportunities for outdoor recreation, job creation, increasing affordable housing, decreasing food insecurity, enabling the creation of small businesses, promoting clean air and water, and increasing climate change resiliency.⁷ And yet, despite this focus on economic development, the developers were clear about their ultimate aims, which sit firmly within public health, as one of the project's key planners noted, "In a way, the actual rehab of housing is one of the least significant parts of it. It's really about building a safe neighborhood that brings amenities and economic opportunities that are vital to people's wellbeing."⁸

Since it commenced, the project's original goals have been scaled back from the initial aim of rehabilitating more than 100 homes. At the time the original goal was reworked, project managers expressed hope that the project would still be completed as planned. That goal was ultimately abandoned, however, as project managers relinquished their right to the remaining properties.⁸ Despite this change in scope, the project showed signs of progress, with the rehabilitation of 13 homes, employing 40 residents, and clearing illegal dump sites.⁹ Speaking to the difficulty of this ambitious plan, the *Detroit Free Press* noted, "The city's vision for Fitzgerald

was bold. The timeline to complete the work was aggressive." Though the decision to scale back the project was disappointing, managers stand behind the project's accomplishments, with one stating that "There's lots of numbers we can throw out to show that this project was anything but a disappointment."⁸ Yet, in 2018, some residents publicly expressed disappointment with what they considered a lack of progress, with the *Detroit Free Press* reporting that "There is confusion about jobs that were supposed to be created, and communication with the developer has been uneven."¹⁰

As a result of changes in the project's scope, tensions between residents and developers have also arisen, underscoring the tentativeness of the existing relationships on which the project depends. Residents have expressed concerns about a lack of communication between Fitz Forward and the community.¹¹ This problem is compounded by a lack of internet access for many residents, reminding us that urban internet access remains a challenging equity issue and that multiple approaches to media, including fliers and direct mail, may be important in some communities.¹⁰ To aid in communication, a project office was created, however, the timing of the office's establishment suggests that communication was largely reactive instead of proactive.¹¹

While there are many variables to be considered in understanding what lessons could be learned from FitzForward, the absence, at least publicly, of individual benchmarks for developers to meet throughout the project timeline appears to have made it difficult to track progress or provide residents with up-to-date information. Had residents sought out publicly available evaluative information on the plan, they would have encountered outdated developer websites and broken website links. For example, a link on the website for the Detroit Collaborative Design Center inviting users to "Click here for more information about the project!" was broken, and the Fitzgerald-Detroit.com website is now "defunct."⁹ Though there are some news articles available with updates on progress, they are limited.¹²

Case 2: West Ward—Newark, New Jersey

In Newark, New Jersey, the West Ward Neighborhood Development Plan aimed to rehabilitate and redevelop a 21-block radius in a neighborhood with a decaying housing stock and high levels of crime stemming from a long history of neglect and policy failure.¹³ Median household income in the neighborhood is about \$2000 less than Newark averages.¹⁴ The West Ward was targeted for development due to its high concentration of blight, while also possessing a "good mix of residential and commercial properties allowing for redevelopment."¹⁵ The plan centers on improving safety, increasing affordable housing, improving public services, and strengthening community more generally. The neighborhood plan was launched in 2016 by the city, in partnership with a group of small local developers. Newark's mayor explained that the choice to work with small developers was intentional and aligns with the goal of ensuring that "...Newark's growth is equitable and that resi-



dents benefit from the surge of investment here.” The Mayor suggested, as well, that small developers are uniquely positioned to “build wealth in the community, provide jobs for residents, and have a personal stake in shaping a prosperous future for our city.”¹⁶ And so while the nominal focus of the West Ward Development Plan is to address entrenched poverty and promote economic growth, the framing of the project specifically recognizes not only that these aims are deeply entwined with improved health, but that communication is critical to the project’s success.

As no dedicated websites were developed for the project, news articles are the most widely available resources for tracking the project. Information regarding the plan can also be found on the City of Newark’s Facebook page where residents can access a recording of a livestreamed meeting hosted by the Newark mayor, intended to introduce the 6 developers and their individual projects to the neighborhood residents. While this platform is an example of a potentially effective means of communication with community members, it is also important to remember that accessing such platforms requires digital infrastructure and equipment. In addition, this public meeting is almost 90 minutes long. The video’s lack of an index makes referencing individual points of information difficult. The event did indicate that there was significant municipal interest in active engagement, as more than 500 residents availed themselves of the opportunity to provide comments to the developers. Most comments pertained to community members’ concerns or satisfaction with progress and communication. The comments drove a discussion largely focused on the reasoning behind choosing the plan’s developers, possible job opportunities with developers, housing affordability, and the quality of housing.¹⁷

Case 3: Linden—Columbus, Ohio

The One Linden Plan was developed to address health disparities and bring economic stability to the Linden neighborhood of Columbus, Ohio. First conceived in 2017 as a collaboration of local stakeholders, including but not limited to lending and housing institutions, a local children’s hospital, faith-based community organizations, and community members, the plan’s stated goal was to “create a roadmap for safe neighborhoods, economic development and access to affordable housing, quality health care, education and employment opportunities in Linden.”¹⁸ Of note, the plan was intended as a list of recommendations and was not necessarily a commitment from specific entities to follow this plan as suggested, which, owing to the concreteness of the word ‘plan’, could create disconnect between expectations and reality. The plan focuses on an area of Linden that is 2.63 square miles, northeast of downtown Columbus. Demographically, Linden is a primarily Black (63.4%) community with a median household income of \$23,934, and nearly half of its residents live below the poverty level.¹⁸

Plan development, grounded in feedback and participation from stakeholders, occurred over the course of 14 months. A planning

team was enlisted to engage residents and other stakeholders of Linden to ensure that their voices were heard and incorporated into the plan’s goals. At the end of the planning period, “10 Big Ideas” were announced as the framework for revitalizing the community, with each idea consisting of a broad goal and the elements necessary to achieve those goals. Each of the “Big Ideas” includes a table which presents categorized recommended action items and accompanying information regarding specific outcomes/metrics, potential partners, and a suggested time frame should these recommendations be followed. These time frames vary, but most were intended to be achieved in spans of 1 to 5 years or 6 to 10 years. The language accompanying the plan emphasizes “empowering residents” and “building capacity,” both of which are proposed to take place “across the demographic spectrum, from youth to elders and across income and race.” Critically, the project leaders promise a focus on neighborhood-level relationships and community engaged development.¹⁸

A large collaborative effort, “614 for Linden,” was announced approximately 1 year after One Linden’s launch. The collaborative is made up of 6 nonprofit organizations and 4 financial institutions (Table 1) that collectively pledged a \$25 million investment aimed at 4 of the “10 Big Ideas” (Table 2) which focused on housing improvement, business development, entrepreneurial support, community investment, and resident health. The “614 for Linden” effort gained a great deal of positive media attention.¹⁹⁻²¹

Although the plan’s scope, aims, and objectives are now easy to locate online, updates on the plan’s progress were minimal over the past 2 years. The website lay mostly dormant for years and contained broken links leading to “page not found” errors. This included the website’s “Our Linden” email subscription tool, which was nonfunctional for more than a year, as was a form for submitting questions and concerns. Both examples exhibit attempts at community engagement that could have dramatically improved the project’s early communication strategy. After a 2-year lull in public announcements, no doubt impacted to some degree by disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, a 2021 blog post on the Greater Ohio Policy Center website detailed 614 for Linden’s progress.²² In a notable return to iterative communication, the post links to the “614 for Linden” website for further updates, including project and event announcements and a contact form for submitting questions and concerns. In providing such information, the Greater Ohio Policy Center has been tasked as an external evaluator of the project involving the development of impact reports intended to be made publicly available. Tracking and evaluation is required as a condition of JPMorgan Chase’s PRO Neighborhood initiative, which invested \$5 million into the project.²² In other words, from the period when we began our research, to the time of revisions of this manuscript, substantial improvements and a meaningful course correction were made. A brief visit to OneLinden.org also indicates that steady improvement in communication has been made as the website now lists resources available to residents in categories named “Emergency



Table 1. Nonprofits and Community Development Financial Institutions

Nonprofits	Community Development Financial Institutions
Saint Stephen's Community House	Ohio Capital Finance Corporation
Community Development for All People	Affordable Housing Trust of Columbus and Franklin County
Healthy Neighborhoods Healthy Families	Finance Fund Capital Corporation
The Affordable Housing Alliance of Central Ohio	Economic Community Development Institute
Community Shelter Board	
Nationwide Children's Hospital	

Table 2. "Ten Big Ideas"

1. Stabilize and expand housing options*	6. Address early childhood experience
2. Connect residents to employment	7. Reimagine Cleveland Avenue
3. Reduce crime and improve perception	8. Build community investment*
4. Support student success	9. Connect the community
5. Support entrepreneurs and develop business*	10. Support resident health*

*Areas on which the plan ultimately focused.

Services," "Health and Social Services," "Food," and "Housing" as well as other areas relevant to resident wellbeing.²³

Lessons Learned

In the early days when community development was first arising as a coherent concept, it was rare for communication to be a focus, likely because such work tended to be conceived and carried out in a top-down manner.²⁴ Today, however, it is increasingly understood that communication with communities is essential to the long-term success and sustainable change that such projects aim to create.²⁵ Successful projects start with "people not projects."²⁶ There is also a growing literature on community-based health to guide people-centered development work that takes communication seriously.²⁷ This includes valuable scholarly resources on development and communication, generally,²⁸ as well as the evaluation of communication practices within projects.^{29,30} Though communicative aims can be difficult to achieve, these cases suggest some general principles that might be used by partners for effective communication. Given the need to demonstrate concrete development and progress if community buy-in and trust is to be attained, a range of technical questions about community development plans or projects should be examined.

The success of these collaborations hinges on accessible, up-to-date information shared on an ongoing basis with community members, preferably in qualitatively different forums. The Newark case, which lacked a formal website, reminds us of the importance of local news coverage to development work. Predictably, there is significant distrust within long-neglected communities, and failures in communicating during the course of long-term plans may perpetuate this distrust.³¹ Updating communities

across multiple media and including members as part of the process regularly is a way to assure residents and key stakeholders that the larger aims remain intact. This is especially true when large disruptions (like a pandemic) interrupt the ability to hold kickoff events, stage high-profile announcements, and carry out face-to-face forums. Effective and regularly updated websites and printed materials distributed within the community are critical in resisting a common cycle of big announcements that then fade into months and years of projects with mixed results. The 3 cases discussed suggest that the cultivation of trust is likely the most enduring effect that these types of large-scale developments and projects can have on communities.³² Projects like those described above cannot be carried out in a vacuum, however. In addition, this work is never purely forward-looking, as development must simultaneously address the past and the future, especially where there is pervasive distrust.

Our analysis of these communities points to 3 key lessons that collaboratives and municipal planners should heed when undertaking comprehensive and long-term community development initiatives. All concern distinct, though related, insights into effective communication.

1. Communication should be proactive, not reactive.

Communication strategies should be forward-thinking and rigorously adhered to through the stages of development, especially when delays occur. Too often, as in the field of crisis communication,³³ communication becomes a concern only after something has gone wrong, which erodes trust and increases the amount of work community partners will need to do to repair relationships. Stakeholders must avoid making grand promises that are then



followed up with sparse or disjointed communication. Ultimately, it is not promises but actions, paired with effective communication, that build neighborhood trust. While members of collaborative development efforts may include information on social media and the internet, larger, multi-pronged plans are generally well-known, at least in their broad strokes, and contain many moving parts. Ideally, these moving parts should be followed and documented appropriately in a single location. Yet, our attempts to identify such information clearinghouses, either in current or past community development projects, turned up empty. The problems we have identified suggest that such clearinghouses should not only be established and maintained, but should be actively promoted to alert communities to their existence. While the presence of such tools is important, a nonfunctional communication tool may be equally, if not more disruptive to trust building than a lack thereof. Such a clearinghouse should be culturally conditioned, linguistically competent, and reflect the broader communicative needs of specific communities, especially if internet access is a barrier for residents.

2. To the extent possible, show progress in real time on websites and apps.

Some of the websites created to showcase and disseminate information about the plans and projects we examined are impressive in scope, but lack updates on incremental progress. Though program partners may have sweeping visions for improving communities, these entities often miss out on opportunities to communicate with community members. Updates, which can be carried out through meetings, web-based communiques, and signage in the community, are critical in the process of communication and trust-building.

Outdated information and broken links may be read by communities as signs that the current project is another instance of being forgotten. Community members and other stakeholders should have easy access to updated and reliable information, rather than needing to search through local news sources or broken links to learn about progress in community development. Well-maintained websites can be an effective means of communicating with local residents, especially at a time when community members may be just as likely to learn about developments taking place on their street via the internet. For example, the University Circle (Cleveland) website contains a comprehensive news section that provides visitors with extensive information not only regarding development work in the area, but events, community organizations, and other resources.³ As a counterpoint to this useful resource, nonprofits such as CityWide Development are highly engaged in a range of important development projects in Dayton, Ohio, but it is challenging to get a sense of the state of their important work from publicly available resources.³⁴ Oftentimes, the only available resources about projects of great consequence to communities take a corporate-oriented instead of community-oriented communications approach.

3. Approach ongoing communication as part of trust-building.

Iterative communication is an important means of building trust, not only in community development initiatives but in all public initiatives. Accordingly, communications strategies should be built into plans from the beginning and executed according to plan (and adapted as circumstances change) throughout the process. The initial communication of a plan should be followed by progress updates and continued collaboration with the community to achieve set goals. Ongoing updates via structured communications throughout the life of a plan or project can speak volumes to community members who may require both time as well as concrete proof before they will trust in the collaborative nature of community development projects. Web searches yielded no examples of development projects using dedicated smartphone apps to keep community members apprised of progress in projects, which is unfortunate considering that while internet access may be lacking in poor urban communities, recent data suggest that 15% of Americans access the internet exclusively via smartphone.

While it may be tempting to skip project updates that acknowledge slower-than-anticipated or no progress, such updates are still important, and perhaps especially so, in communities that already feel neglected. Paradoxically, this is particularly true with regard to ambitious projects, as plans that are smaller in scope may be easier to track and communicate to the community. Personnel and entities involved in community development work must understand that while celebrating progress is important, building trust with communities is likely more enduring. Finally, to ensure that communications strategies are working, project managers and planners would be well advised to make communication itself part of project assessment.³⁵

A Note on the Pandemic

As it did in clinical medicine and in all sectors of the economy,³⁶ the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 disrupted many projects like the ones we describe. Despite this interruption, their core mission and importance remain. Yet, it is also true that all critiques of events, projects, and promises made before the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic must be qualified. It is understandable, even predictable, that community development work would have been disrupted by the pandemic. At the same time, the pandemic provides an additional opportunity for reflection, not only because it serves as a laboratory for critical thinking about health prevention and public health practice, but because the challenges the pandemic has presented once again move the problematic of communication between official entities (governments and both non-profit and for-profit entities) into stark relief. While before the pandemic many health care institutions had been actively working to improve their communicative and collaborative relationships with communities, the COVID-19 pandemic deepened our understanding of the importance and even imperative of doing this work at an increasingly high level.²⁶ While much of the conversa-



tion during 2021 has concerned misinformation and disinformation regarding vaccination, the underpinnings of these challenges have once again reminded us of the often low levels of trust that erode the potential of establishing strong relationships between varying types of institutions and communities.³⁷ As we move into a post-pandemic status quo, the lessons we are learning from the challenges of public health communication should be leveraged far beyond the individual compliance level of public health. As is apparent from our brief discussion of neighborhoods in Detroit, Newark, and Columbus, the most enduring investments will be those that foster trust in general, which can then be leveraged in a myriad of particular ways for public health promotion.

CONCLUSION

The key takeaways from this brief analysis of 3 community development efforts are united by their concern for effective communication. We share these lessons with a reminder that some of the projects we examined are multipronged community development plans, while others are specific and more narrowly focused. Accordingly, our focus is on the distillation of guiding principles, especially regarding communication, rather than a list of specific practices that developers and planners should take. As we noted above, the insights we offer regarding effective communication in community development and economic vitalization projects are applicable to all public projects, especially in historically marginalized neighborhoods where trust is low.

Scholars have noted the importance of effective and active communication between official and corporate entities and their various community constituencies, including in health care,³⁸ though much of the corporate communications literature is reactive and crisis-oriented instead of taking a more proactive, relationship-building approach.³⁹ Yet, we have asserted that communication also remains an underappreciated aspect of development work. Our analysis underscores the importance of such practices specifically with regard to large and ambitious community-oriented planning, but also connects to a general ethos for communication that we suggest should exist in health promotion generally.

The One Linden Plan is a bold initiative. Given the longstanding history of promises to develop neglected neighborhoods in American cities, it is likely that community members will wait to see concrete developments before getting too excited. In fact, counteracting such suspended disbelief is an important part of such plans or projects with intentions to provide avenues of change in communities. A consideration of the progress toward implementing the plan's recommendations suggests that there are opportunities for improved communication. It is important to remember that communicating with community members is not only a logistical concern, but part of a broader, more sustained effort to build trust in the larger collaborative process of community development. It is with this trust that successful community development and true collaboration across all stakeholders can and will ultimately occur.

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