

Southeast Oklahoma Champion and Enterprise Community

Southeast Oklahoma – bordered on the south by Texas and on the east by Arkansas – is rural, poor, and sparsely populated. All of these factors had made the area less attractive for economic development and other investments, and it gradually fell further and further behind other parts of the state. In some parts of the region, homes were not connected to sewer systems. Roads and buildings deteriorated and stayed that way. And a sense of community crumbled along with them.

In 1994, four counties in this area came together to apply for designation as an Empowerment Zone. That effort did not succeed, but the “consolation prize” – designation as an Enterprise Community and the funding that accompanied it – turned out to be just as valuable. The planning process for the grant brought together groups that had mistrusted one another and competed for funds in the past – including whites, African Americans, and Native Americans who had never worked, lived, or played alongside one another before. Together, they not only won some seed money to begin implementing their plan, but were ultimately able to leverage it into millions of dollars of economic development – and they are still going strong.

Bottom-Up Planning

The Enterprise Community planning group knew that the most efficient way to write their plan would be to just sit down and do it. Instead, they took the time to go to each community in the eight census tracts and make sure every voice was heard. That approach was worth it, even though it took quite a long time in meetings that asked people to write their ideas on Post-it notes or index cards

because some of the participants were illiterate and needed help from their neighbors to write the cards out for them. One was an 80-year-old woman who stood up after the meeting to thank the group. “This is the first time in my 80 years,” she said, “that anyone has ever asked me what I wanted.”

People in the eight census tracts did not all share the same priorities, but they did have one thing in common: they wanted to do things differently. They realized that the old way of doing things – worrying about which community won out over the others – had not gotten them anywhere. “We saw that we were all in the same pot,” one said. “If progress happens over there, it benefits all of us. Everyone is better off, and our turn will come.” He was right. For everyone who participated, their turn did indeed come.

Today, each of the census tracts is represented on a Steering Committee. A third of the Committee members are low-income people who became involved through the planning process, and half are elderly, minority, and/or low-income. One sign of success is that people have remained on the Committee, even after “their” community’s project was funded and completed. Since 1994, only one monthly meeting has not had a quorum. With travel distances of over 100 miles not uncommon, this attendance record is remarkable.

One of the reasons the partnership works so well is that each community has the latitude to identify issues and bring them to the table in its own way. For example, the Choctaw Nation – whose members live in all eight of the census tracts represented in the partnership – have a Tribal decision-making structure of their own that operates differently from those in other communities. From the Steering Committee’s point of view, that makes no difference – as long as the issues of residents in each of the communities are fairly identified, explored, and attended to.

Another factor in the partnership's success and longevity is that it not only seeks the input of community residents, but follows the direction it is given about what each community wants done. For example, some partnership members had reservations about developing a community nutrition center in each of the census tracts. However, most community groups identified such a center as one of their priorities, so the Steering Committee helped each community fund and implement a center. Today, these centers are invaluable community hubs, offering a hospitable place where people in the area can gather as well as a variety of activities that draw people together. Although the centers themselves were the result of external funding, many of their activities are supported by volunteer efforts. Even more significant is the fact that these centers are places where whites, African Americans, and Native Americans, of different economic classes, come together to share a meal, an activity, or a social event.

Building Relationships, Trust, and Infrastructure

Irvin Jones, an African-American resident of the town of Idabel, is one of the community members who started out as a skeptic and is now an enthusiastic booster of the partnership and a community leader. Jones left Idabel to serve in the Army. When he returned in 1992, he hardly recognized his childhood home. His school in the western section of town, the Booker T. Washington school, had closed. The community – like those in neighboring counties – was suffering. Jones and a dozen friends started the Idabel Minority Action Committee, or IMAC, which became heavily involved in the Enterprise Community effort and the strategic planning process. At first, the group was skeptical. “I told them I didn't think anything could come of it that would help my community,” Jones recalls. “I've come to apologize for that statement and I am glad to apologize.”

The planning process and the fair distribution of resources helped change Jones's mind – and changed west Idabel, too. IMAC had already started the

process of transforming the community, with a clean-up effort that (much to their surprise) was noticed and supported by the Mayor – who arranged to pick up the collected trash before being asked to do so. The connection between IMAC and the Enterprise Community planners helped extend the effectiveness of both organizations.

For example, once funds started flowing, the first order of business in Idabel was to restore the abandoned and burned-out school building. Today, the former school is a thriving community center that offers a nutrition program (with free meals prepared entirely by volunteers and delivered once a month to shut-ins), an after-school tutoring program (staffed by volunteer teachers from every Idabel school), a technology program for kids (with pizza on the side!) that uses the 40 computers in the computer lab (39 more computers than west Idabel had before), adult computer classes, and supervised youth social events. The center has even become a popular venue for family reunions.

The western part of Idabel was also a place where basic infrastructure had either been left to deteriorate, or had never been built up in the first place. As funds for sewer systems, roads, and health clinics – among other things – became available, they always seemed to be deployed from the wealthier (and whiter) east side of town. Somehow, the funds always seemed to run out before anything could be fixed in west Idabel. As a result, people living there lacked the basics of 20th century American life. For example, with many homes unconnected to water systems, residents collected rainwater in buckets and carried it back and forth for drinking and cooking. After a heavy rain, raw sewage floated in the streets and muddy water poured from the taps.

The partnership's efforts have brought in millions of dollars for improved sewer systems, roads, water systems, and natural gas services in west Idabel and other Enterprise communities. These and other changes have had a ripple effect. Basic infrastructure has been improved so that people have access to clean

water and access to medical care. People are taking better care of their homes and lawns, so the communities look different. “There was a belief,” one resident said, “that we didn’t have to live like this and change was possible. The apathy was gone.” In addition, African Americans in west Idabel are participating in local government and organizations to an unprecedented degree – at City Council meetings, in the fire department, and on boards and coalitions like the Lion’s Club, the Employment and Training Board, and the Boys and Girls Club.

Several efforts have involved one of the key partners in the Enterprise Community effort, the tribal Choctaw Nation. Native Americans represent 19% of the population in the four counties in this part of Southeast Oklahoma and live in all eight census tracts. The area is rich in Native American history. It was one of the last stops on the Trail of Tears and was home to Wheelock Academy, a former Native American girls’ boarding school originally built in 1832. The partnership worked with the Choctaw Nation to secure funding from Americorps to renovate the school, hoping to someday operate it as Oklahoma’s first tribally built and controlled college and offer courses in the Choctaw language to help preserve this heritage. In addition, the school, the former chief’s house, and other renovated structures will serve as tourist destinations.

Another priority of the partnership is to help low and very low-income families obtain loans and secure new homes by arranging financing for them. Through the partnership’s lead entity, Little Dixie Community Action Agency, 1,300 very low-income families in the area now have decent, affordable homes – new housing that they own. Since these families helped to build each others’ homes – as a condition of participating in the program and receiving low-interest loans – the initiative is building not only housing, but also community.

Developing the Local Economy

One of the themes that surfaced in all of the census tracts was the lack of capital for developing business ventures. Together, the communities have attracted over \$31 million in initiatives to create jobs, promote tourism, and draw new industries to the area. These initiatives include:

- a state-of-the-art physical rehabilitation facility that will employ over 200 people,
- nutrition centers in each of the census tracts (now adding clinics, libraries, and voting precinct services to meet local demand),
- a mobile business information center to create and promote small businesses across the Choctaw Nation,
- four revolving loan programs for small businesses, and
- a hospitality and training center, resort cabins, a marina and other improvements at Hugo Lake in Choctaw County.

Each census tract also has a community development specialist who can help local groups identify new ventures, attract outside investors, and support existing businesses.

The partnership wanted to attract not just any employer, but those who offer jobs with real earning potential – beyond minimum wage. The partnership's investments in infrastructure, tourism, and economic development have started to chip away at Southeast Oklahoma's persistently high poverty levels, which have dropped from 39% to 34% since its efforts started.

Jobs – present and future – are treasured and important, but partnership members are most proud of giving people a new sense of optimism and hope. People have realized how much can be accomplished, with or without funding. Many of these improvements depended and continue to depend, at least in part,

on the unpaid efforts of community residents. The Steering Committee itself is staffed entirely by volunteers. “We’re not paid,” one member explained, “but the experience has made us rich beyond your wildest imagination.”

Pathways to Collaboration

Through its bottom-up collaborative process, the Southeast Oklahoma Champion and Enterprise Community has transformed a number of racially diverse communities engaged in rivalries for scarce resources into a cohesive partnership that is working cooperatively to garner and spread resources throughout the area. The perception of fairness, patience with the process, and awareness that the entire area benefits from any one community’s windfall are all accomplishments that the partnership is eager to share with others.

Underlying all of these achievements is the empowerment of low-income people to voice their concerns in their own terms and to be heard by people in power. Sustaining and expanding the participation of low-income people is a challenge, as is keeping everyone’s level of motivation and enthusiasm at a high level to move the process forward. Inevitably, after years of effort and meetings, some of the initial momentum wears off. And even though the partnership is representing a largely rural area, its most active community partner happens to be the most urban area – so learning more about rural engagement strategies is appealing as well. The partnership’s members are looking forward to sharing their stories and learning from others as *Pathways to Collaboration* begins its work.