

The Long and Winding Road to the “New Normal”



Making Connections works to make neighborhoods more supportive for children and their families. This Samoan family is at a community meeting about annexing White Center/Boulevard Park, which is an unincorporated area in King County, Washington.

“This is not about Casey. This is about how we become stronger, how we are affirmed and lifted up to be vocal with institutions and systems that impact our lives, supported by Casey.”

—SILI SAVUSA

How does a community develop a way to manage a community change initiative that will help sustain this work over time but not undermine the energy of a community working together to create a new way of doing business?

The first *Making Connections* community to confront this challenge has been White Center/Boulevard Park, which is an extremely diverse, mostly lower-income neighborhood south of Seattle. They have learned a lot about the process of developing a “Local Management Entity” and creating what they call the “new normal.”

“What is normal, or perhaps we should be asking,
What is the new normal?”

—Bob Watt

Well, it really was a dark and stormy night. While driving in the early parts of a storm that brought buckets of rain and winds gusting up to 90 mph, uprooting giant trees and knocking out power for as long as a week in White Center, I wondered how important this White Center Community Development Association board meeting could be.

As sheets of water rolled off my windshield, I convinced myself that it was important because the CDA board was going to accept becoming the “Local Management Entity” of the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s *Making Connections* Initiative. Begun seven years ago, *Making Connections* is a long-term effort to strengthen families and transform

“tough” neighborhoods in 10 cities across the country.

This meeting should be quite interesting since it was following a very animated discussion during a meeting/retreat a month earlier with Frank Farrow the Casey Foundation’s Director of Community Change Initiatives. The reaction to Farrow’s timeline for an agreement had been met with panic and skepticism, but had ended with the possibility that a letter of agreement could be worked out by this meeting.

When I arrived, about half the CDA’s board members were at the Peruvian restaurant. They were waiting for others who had been delayed by the storm. When I overheard a comment, “I hope we get a quorum,” I was surprised to hear CDA Board President Rob Watt answer, “Well, I’ve got a bunch of proxies in my pocket, this will be a slam dunk. We’re here just to have a short meeting so that we can eat and have some fun.”

Soon after, two board members who had expressed reservations at the earlier meeting arrived and the meeting started. The basics – announcements, minutes, board applications – were dispensed quickly. The letter of agreement was brought up for discussion, with a few board members expressing their reservations. Watt then moved for acceptance of the LOA, announced that it had been passed, and the meeting ended.

I felt cheated: it went so fast. I looked at Theresa Fujiwara, *Making Connections*’ long-time site liaison/coordinator, and asked, “What happened? I thought there’d be some fireworks.”

“Credit Wendy (Watanabe) and Rob,” she answered. “They did their homework.”

By Robert Shimabukuro

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“What is normal? You set the mold for that.
Do not look to others to define it.”

—Delia Carmen



Ann Castro shows off her pastries at the Salvadorian Bakery and Restaurant in White Center. The bakery has been a big supporter of *Making Connections*, hosting many of its meetings.

Later that night, the wind began to really get going. Hurricane force. The power went out. The next day the *Making Connections* Partners Group was supposed to meet, with the partners signing off on a letter supporting the CDA letter of agreement. I was without electricity, without telephone, pretty much incommunicado. No way was there going to be a meeting, I thought.

But the meeting of the partners had taken place after being moved to the *Making Connections* team office, which also did not have power but which did have a skylight.

“We called everyone to tell them we were moving the meeting,” explained Fujiwara. “Everyone was huddled in their coats. The support letter for the LOA passed, we finished up some other business, and adjourned. It was the shortest meeting we had had, just an hour and a half.”

Trying to create the “New Normal”

The relatively calm meetings amidst extremely harsh weather conditions in December 2006 were in stark contrast to the lively meeting in July 2005 on a beautiful Northwest summer day. The meeting kicked off the discussions between White Center/Boulevard Park residents, community activists and community-based organizations with Casey Foundation *Making Connections* staff and consultants and the local Partners Group. The discussions were about how to sustain and govern *Making Connections* in White Center/Boulevard Park.

This meeting had come about largely as a result of a proposal that White Center *Making Connections* Site Team Leader Bob Giloth made

“It’s as important for the foundation to figure out how it can manage sites in a different way as it is for sites to figure out how to be more locally owned. In fact, there’s been a tremendous amount of local ownership.”

—Bob Giloth

to Casey Foundation Vice President Ralph Smith and Frank Farrow in December 2003. The White Center *Making Connections* team, he said, “is proposing to prototype the transition to local ownership in 2004. The prototype will focus on developing a results-oriented, performance-based compact by the end of 2004 that spells out vision, goals and results.”

Giloth emphasized that it wasn’t a proposal “to figure out how to transition to local ownership, but how to really transition into much more local ownership, because it’s already locally owned. It’s as important for the foundation to figure out how it can manage sites in a different way as it is for sites to figure out how to be more locally owned. In fact, there’s been a tremendous amount of local ownership.”

The idea, welcomed by Farrow and Smith, set in motion a flurry of discussions and

activity about what could happen in 2004, what Casey’s role would be in the transition, and who should be involved in these discussions.

With a compact required by the end of 2004, one member said the site team “furiously overworked” to produce such a compact. The process was complicated further by the fact Giloth also felt that the time was right for him to leave and for Fujiwara to lead the local management of the initiative.

The focus of *Making Connections* changed radically during the year. The focus changed from building relationships and “making connections” to “results-based accountability.” Work plans and goals began to change rapidly.

White Center/
Boulevard Park is
one of the most
diverse communities
in the country.
Meetings often
involve simultaneous
translation in as many
as 11 languages. This
is Thuong Thach of the
Khmer Association of
Seattle/King County,
who is translating
for the Cambodian
community at the
2005 Community
Summit on
Annexation.



“How do you maintain the vision of the thriving community? Is there a thriving community like White Center where the governance structures—schools, etc.—are helping it thrive and you do not need a Making Connections effort to keep it going?”

—Bob Watt

To help get everyone on the same page, a large group of Trusted Advocates, work group members and site team members attended a week-long Mark Friedman “Train-the-Trainer” workshop. The purpose was to lay the groundwork for “developing a results-oriented, performance-based compact that spells out vision, goals and results.” (The Trusted Advocates began as a group of bilingual, bicultural community workers in 2001. Its role today “is to ensure that the voices and concerns of the limited English speaking and ethnic minority residents are heard, and to increase their involvement at all levels in the community.”)

During this period, the idea that a structure was needed that “could manage the transition and ensure sustainability” surfaced. At an April 2004 meeting, Farrow laid out his thoughts on the subject, which consisted of six roles that different organizations could play, along with organizations that could play these roles:

- **Management intermediary role for *Making Connections*** (Nonprofit Assistance Center—NAC)
- **Local Learning Partnership Coordination** (United Way, NAC)
- **Resident Leadership** (Trusted Advocates)
- **Partners/co-investors Accountability and Decision-making Role:** ensure a focus on results, accountability for results and sufficient investment to achieve results (Partners Group)
- **Lead Strategy Partners:** partner organizations playing a critical role in successful implementation of key *Making Connections*

strategies such as FES (Family Economic Success). (Nine organizations were seen as possible lead strategy partners.)

- **Fiscal Agent** (Seattle Foundation)

Given all the deliberations, timelines were set back. Determining what existed structurally used a lot of energy in meetings, interviews and reviews at all levels: staff, partners and community. The terms “pilot project” and “prototype” were tossed out the window. The team and community replaced those terms with “experiment” and “guinea pigs.”

And indeed, they felt just like that. The transition from “making connections” to “results-based accountability” took its toll, as some partner organizations and individuals felt that the foundation had fundamentally changed its focus and the rules of the game in midstream. Or they simply did not understand what was going on.

By early 2005, the partners began to have serious discussions about the entity(ies) which would act as intermediaries between the local initiative and the foundation.

In July 2005, the site team convened a meeting with all parties to discuss the governing structure of the institution that would manage and sustain the community-driven work started by *Making Connections*. After listening to the partners give their views of the current state of the initiative locally, Farrow offered the Casey Foundation’s list of non-negotiables, adding that, “the work here is very aligned” with these requirements:

“This is unheard of, to have the partnerships and to meet like this.
We have to do a lot to help people understand and help raise
the comfort level of residents to engage in these processes.”

—Sili Savasa

1. The commitment to building a community where everyone has the potential to thrive.
2. A community unrelentingly focused on ensuring that residents and organizations could work together on a level playing field.
3. A way of doing business that involves strong resident leadership and resident voice in every aspect of the work.
4. The alliance of partners who have made a long-term commitment.
5. Use of data which is researched, collected and distributed by a community body.
6. Increased community capacities.

But he had concerns, which he characterized as more of the “how-to-do-it” nature:

1. **The ongoing structure** by which partner organizations hold themselves accountable. What is the stable decision-making process? To whom does the foundation distribute its resources?
2. **A strategy on co-investment.** What is the financing plan that makes the work sustainable over the next five years?
3. **The need for written “compacts” or “covenants”** that solidify commitments.

It was in response to these concerns that Partners Group Chair Bob Watt asked for help, wondering if perhaps the foundation knew of communities where its governance structures “were helping it thrive” and where it was normal for a very diverse community to be thriving. “What is normal, or per-

haps we should be asking, ‘what is the new normal?’”

“In the end, it is about creating a community where everyone has an opportunity to thrive. Where that is happening, there is hope, peace and a future. How do you maintain the vision of the thriving community? Is there a thriving community like White Center where the governance structures—schools, etc.—are helping it thrive and you do not need a *Making Connections* effort to keep it going?”

Watt’s comments engendered a lively exchange of comments, ideas and suggestions from site team members, partners and Casey Foundation consultants.

Casey Foundation Senior Associate Irene Lee, commented on the uniqueness of what was happening in White Center/Boulevard Park: groups were focused on getting together rather than competing for funding. She was excited about this because “the paradigm has changed from need and competition to coming together.”

“This is unheard of, to have the partnerships and to meet like this,” said Sili Savasa, a Trusted Advocate and chair of *Making Connections* School Success Work Group. “We have to do a lot to help people understand and help raise the comfort level of residents to engage in these processes.”

Casey Evaluation Liaison Delia Carmen best expressed the opinion repeated often in the discussion: “What is normal? You set the mold for that. Do not look to others to define it.” She also cautioned that, “It would be help-

“A lot of what is happening is organic and unstructured, but now we are tightening, getting clear on goals and measures of progress.”

—Bob Watt



Site Coordinator Theresa Fujiwara and Trusted Advocate Leader Sili Savusa talk with a participant at a community meeting. Fujiwara, Savusa and Aileen Balahadia form the LME Leadership Team.

ful to know the issues behind, the struggles behind, working together.”

This community self-definition was one of the strongest messages coming from this meeting. Farrow had invited the group to think creatively, telling them that, “You are the prototype.” The only guidelines seemed to be the “bare bones framework” of “non-negotiables,” along with a structure to hold the group together, a structure to be defined by a written covenant or compact.

The Partners Group took it to heart. A Governance Subcommittee had been formed prior to the July meeting to determine how the initiative could be more efficiently structured, with a closer look at the role of the Partners Group and its relation to the work being done in the community.

As Watt said at the July 2005 meeting, “A lot of what is happening is organic and unstructured, but now we are tightening, getting clear on goals and measures of progress. While the Partners Group is not yet a formal organization, there is buy-in for more structural clarity.”

Following the July 2005 meeting, the Governance Subcommittee was re-formed with majority resident/Trusted Advocate representation, along with the chairs of the Partners and their deputies groups. (The deputies group is made up of “deputies” of the partners, people who could more easily come to monthly meetings.)

The Governance Subcommittee began to look at possible organizations to become the “local intermediary.” Farrow had asked for a stable organization with an established deci-

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—*Making Connections Partner*

sion-making process and a track record in handling large sums of money.

But the Governance Subcommittee, with its resident/Trusted Advocate majority, began to look for other qualities, primarily “locally owned,” “having the same values” and “listens to community.” In late 2005/early 2006, the Subcommittee chose the White Center Community Development Association, a then-three-year-old community development organization and the first organization created by *Making Connections*. The decision was a shock since no one had suggested the CDA as a possibility for any of the intermediary roles. But as Savusa put it, “Why not? We created it. They are us.”

But the Partners Group was not convinced. As one of them said, “You can’t make the offer or even choose an entity without spelling out why you chose the organization and what the organization is expected to do. It would be unfair to the community and unfair to the organization.” So the matter was referred back to the Subcommittee for more study.

What does it mean to be “aligned” with the values of the community?

Meeting in February 2006, the Subcommittee determined again that the most important criterion was that the LME be aligned with the values of the community, as represented by the Trusted Advocates, a multicultural, multilingual body of residents, community leaders and organizers who are, as Fujiwara puts it, the heart and soul of the initiative. The Advocates

did not see themselves simply as reviewers of programs designed by others. They wanted an organization that would be responsive to their concerns, one that would welcome their input as experts in co-designing programs.

In order to get deeper on the “values” of the community, consultant James Fong asked the Subcommittee to clarify what “aligned with the values of the community” meant. One member replied that, “We want a relationship with the intermediary that you have with your friends, that you can just talk and ask questions and call each other out when necessary, but it would be all right because we have a strong relationship.”

Others envisioned a place where several languages could be heard being spoken at the same time, there would be numerous opportunities for residents to get involved, and there would be a commitment to leadership development for everyone, especially youth. What emerged was a list:

- Community issues drive direction.
- Engagement process allows people to feel truly involved (“engagement is palpable—you can feel it”).
- Mutual validation of institutional heads and Trusted Advocates/community leaders.
- Approaching issues through a values framework.
- Strong communities build strong families/strong families build strong communities.

They also began working on the functions of the management entity. These would include providing leadership, engaging commu-

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—Governance Subcommittee Member

nity support in an authentic way, dispensing funds, and developing a process for documenting the value of the work that allows for reflection. The entity would also support a complex structure and administer and staff the work.

During the next few months, the Subcommittee refined these functions and the values. It also developed a list of purposes, functions and criteria for choosing the LME. Seven options were considered, including the Trusted Advocates. Others that were considered included: the Nonprofit Assistance Center; a new entity to be developed by White Center *Making Connections*; White Center Community Development Association (CDA); continuing as a loose cooperative; a local funder; and a local jurisdiction.

Given the criteria, which were heavily

weighted to “community involved and owned,” the decision to continue with the CDA was a “slam dunk.” The limited capacity of the CDA was not ignored, it was just not of high importance. With some help, the Subcommittee was saying, we can build capacity, but it’s more difficult to introduce a new values system to an existing institution.

“The creation of the Community Development Association is a great example of local sustainability,” explained the CDA’s executive director Aileen Balahadia. “It provides a structure to do the work, advocate for the work, with a paid staff, but it also works with a board that comes from the resident and business community. We made a decision to stay connected on the ground. This organization is of this community and led by people in this community.”

Eritrean mother and son at the community meeting on annexation. Residents of White Center/Boulevard Park come from many countries, including Cambodia, Eritrea, Somalia, Bosnia/Croatia, Russia, El Salvador, Samoa, Togo, Iraq, Iran, Vietnam and Mexico.



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At their July 2006 meeting, the Partners Group approved the Governance Subcommittee “to engage in discussion with the CDA” about the possibility of becoming the Local Management Entity.

“Despite being a relatively new organization, the CDA emerged as the obvious and compelling choice,” noted Wendy Watanabe, consultant for the Local Management Entity process. “Created by community demand, located in White Center, committed to resident involvement and holding the values of the community, the CDA has overwhelming legitimacy and credibility in the eyes of the community as an authentic partner over the long-term.”

For the CDA, while the decision to agree to become the LME was a huge one, ultimately it was a “no brainer,” in the words of one of CDA’s board members, according to Balahadia. She says that he asked, “Where else would we get this opportunity? A major foundation wants to put resources into our community. And they are willing to help us get there by building our capacity.”

Her board recognized that becoming the LME was “a unique challenge, with lots of big issues and potential headaches. But the big picture was that we wanted to see *Making Connections* continue and we wanted to see it grounded in the community.”

CDA saw this as “an opportunity to get more holistic,” moving beyond affordable housing into the issues of jobs and early learning. “Only by thinking about it holistically,” Balahadia explains, “can we accomplish what we want to accomplish. We will be able to

build the core competencies of our leadership, and it’s hard to get support for that. Here is a foundation that sees the importance of building capacity. We saw it as an amazing opportunity for White Center, with residents leading and controlling the work.”



Like fast-break basketball: the process of moving to an “LME”

In April 2006, Casey Foundation Vice President Ralph Smith laid out the foundation’s guidelines for the Local Management Entity. The document listed “characteristics of an effective Local Management Entity,” a definition of “local readiness” and possible models for a “LME.” *Making Connections* site liaison Theresa Fujiwara said that the foundation’s guidelines “added some concreteness to what we needed to do next.” This allowed the site team to get the CDA “to understand what it was getting into.”

The foundation guidelines also included an aggressive timeline, which called for “an initial cohort of sites” to move into “the sustainability mode” by the end of 2006. With December only six months away from the July 2006 Partners meeting, all parties decided that the Governance Subcommittee needed to expand.

This expanded team—which included CDA board members and more Trusted Advocates and partners—met in August to lay out what needed to be done before a meaningful discussion between the CDA, Trusted Advocates, Partners and *Making*

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The Community Development Association's Aileen Balahadia asked, “Where else would we get this opportunity?”

Connections could take place. November was seen as the last possible date to hold such a meeting in order that a December agreement could be worked out and signed.

The CDA board knew it had a long way to go. It looked at *Making Connections* staffing, the work groups, the strategies and the wide swath of organizations involved, and wondered how their small staff (which equaled 2.5 Full-Time Equivalent positions) could change to handle all that in six months. The tasks seemed immense.

While the site team also realized this, it saw this time as an opportunity to “intensify partners’ involvement and get them to step up, to function in the ‘new normal.’”

The next six months seemed like fast-break basketball with no time to breathe. In

addition to the process for choosing a Local Management Entity, the site team and the Trusted Advocates were working with other deadlines: the 2007 Foundation Investment Summary for the Casey Foundation combined with the Community Investment Plan for the Partners Group, plus the community outreach plan for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation’s White Center Early Learning Initiative. In addition, the Trusted Advocates were involved in gathering data that would help Highline School District officials develop a plan addressing racial disparities in student achievement.

All of this work involved extensive Trusted Advocates participation. All involved technical support so that the Trusted Advocates could actively and meaningfully participate in the discussions.

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And if these pressures weren't enough, the Trusted Advocates and the CDA were also heavily involved with the possible annexation of White Center/Boulevard Park to either Seattle or Burien, along with the development of a possible multicultural center.

Having to provide support to both the Trusted Advocates and the CDA board in the LME process during the same period seemed daunting to all. Everyone, including the *Making Connections* staff, felt stretched out and drained. But the march toward the LME continued.

The expanded subcommittee decided that defining the phases of the hand-over would be the most realistic way to proceed, given the short time to make a decision. Watanabe developed a proposal explaining the possible phase-in periods. In other words, the agreement would be a timetable of things to be done over the next three years, requiring commitments from the CDA and the Casey Foundation.

“I was drafting a proposal to present to them before the November 13 retreat so that they could be more informed, so that they could have a conversation that would get them to the point of making a decision about whether they could even sign a letter of agreement, which we hadn't drafted yet,” explained Watanabe.

“Imbedded in this was our assumption about a 3-year phase-in, about how we thought a gradual transition would make sense. We acknowledged that the CDA had

limited capacity. How could they take this on? So we said, ‘We don't know if this is exactly the right timing, but clearly there was an assumption that, because of the enormity of the task and the capacity (needs) of the CDA, that it would be phased.’”

The planning for the November retreat moved forward, based on the “3-year phase-in” proposal that had been sent to the Casey Foundation in early October. With no response from the foundation, the committee assumed that the proposal was acceptable. However, on the Friday before the meeting, the team learned that it was not.

“We were assuming that, given our local perspective and what we know about the CDA and about how strongly people feel about this, that the only way we could do this is to phase it in, in some form,” Watanabe explained. “And since we didn't hear or know, it was a real shock to hear from (site team liaison) Bill (Shepardson) that this is not the tenor of his conversation with Frank.”

Word that the proposal was not adequate upset the site team and the CDA. The surprise was even more pronounced given the fact that Farrow had accepted an invitation to attend the retreat and had not mentioned his reservations about the proposal earlier. His planned appearance set the stage for a very exciting meeting on the following Monday.

On Monday, after listening to the comments wondering why it was not possible to have a phase-in period, Farrow

“I understand. All you really need is a commitment of some kind. That’s what this really is, it’s not a takeover or hand-off, it’s a merger. It’s a merger between CDA, the Trusted Advocates and the partners.”

—Dan Carlson

Jeanne Bray (left) and Sharmu Luna at Community Schools Partners of Highline, which was created by *Making Connections’* Resident Leadership Council to create after-school programs.



explained that the foundation didn’t want to risk paying to build the capacity of an organization for several years only to have it decide that it can’t or won’t do it. He said that the foundation needed much greater assurance that this organization will commit and be able to do the job. It didn’t want to start this process over again at the end of its 10-year commitment.

No one seemed to have an answer to that. Some talked about trust. Some talked about the foundation’s commitment. Most just said that the CDA could not commit to anything unless it had the commitment of the foundation or some other body to help it. In addition, CDA Executive Director Balahadia was leaving the next week for a long-planned vacation and would not be returning until January 2007. Prospects for an agreement seemed tenuous, at best.

But suddenly, a fresh voice out of the blue, CDA board member Dan Carlson offered, “I understand. All you really need is a commitment of some kind. That’s what this really is, it’s not a takeover or hand-off, it’s a merger. It’s a merger between CDA, the Trusted Advocates and the partners. And all we need is a letter of agreement between the parties to commit to this. Would that be acceptable?”

Frank thought about it for a few seconds and answered with a smile, “Yes, it could be.”

“Well,” Carlson said, “I think it could be done. We have a board meeting on December 14. I’m sure we could draft something and have our board approve something by the end of the year.”

Some board members concurred with him while others had their doubts, both about the

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—Aileen Balahadia

timeline and about the merger. But the discussion took on a much more optimistic tenor after the merger idea was expressed.

While there didn’t seem to be much difference in this new proposal, the board members thought a merger sounded a lot better. Other formulations implied, to some of them at least, that the Casey Foundation would be directing the change, perhaps forcing them to become something they were not and potentially expressing dissatisfaction with the work the CDA had done in its short history.

A merger presented a different take on the matter, explained Balahadia. “The merger idea felt better because it respected the work of the CDA since our founding in 2002 and was assurance to our board that our community economic development goals wouldn’t fade. There was also a great deal of admiration and acknowledgment that this opportunity was so unique—to have a major foundation decide to really speak their commitment to resident leadership—that the CDA all understood that the risk was still worth it.”

The period between the November 13th and December 14th meetings was a busy one for the LME support team. Before she left for the Philippines, Balahadia wrote a letter to her board expressing her strong support for the merger concept and for the CDA embracing the LME functions. “The LME function is in line with our core values of community,” she wrote.

In addition, *Making Connections*’ schools and jobs strategies, the community connec-

tions with the Trusted Advocates and the network of resident leaders, and the group of partners from the private, public and nonprofit sectors “would be of tremendous importance to our organization.”

CDA Board President Rob Watt began “one-on-one conversations” with board members, giving his interpretation to what Farrow had said: “I talked to everybody. I went around the horn. I pretty much knew where they were coming from, but I wanted to hear from them what they thought. I read between the lines of what Frank was saying and I conveyed that to the others.

“And what he [Farrow] was saying was, ‘We want some assurances that you’re going to start this thing and you’re going to finish it. We’re a little nervous that we’re putting some big resources in here and that you’re going to start and not finish. We want some assurances from you guys that you’re going to start this thing and finish it strong.’ And I understand it. And I conveyed this to the other board members.

“This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and we cannot pass this up. If we do, we’re kicking ourselves in the butt. What have we got to lose?”

Watanabe began working on a letter of agreement, starting out with the “non-negotiables” of each of the parties involved and finding common ground between the foundation, the Trusted Advocates and the CDA. The letter of agreement passed unanimously, although two CDA board members expressed their reservations, mostly about the timetable

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—Rob Watt

and the fact that a lot of time would be spent in meetings about the merger that might be a distraction from the “real work at the ground level.”

The two board members who expressed their concerns were prescient. Since January 2007, the number of meetings about the merger has exploded. There are ongoing LME meetings with the Trusted Advocates focusing on structure, governance, operations, transition and “co-location” for both *Making Connections* staff consultants and CDA staff. Some regular staff meetings and Trusted Advocate’s meetings are specifically set aside for LME planning, discussion and information dissemination.

But an even more significant result of the increased pace of the initiative became apparent in early 2007. In the euphoria of meeting the foundation’s deadline for a letter of agreement, one important ingredient was overlooked: the Trusted Advocates as a group had not met to formally accept the merger concept proposal.

Their end-of-the-year workload wore on the Trusted Advocates. Many,

including some on the Trusted Advocates’ Steering Committee, felt left out of the process for the LME, or not informed. Constant meetings, discussions about money, hiring processes (adding a few Trusted Advocates to the *Making Connections* staff) and the eventual layoff of the Trusted Advocates’ staff person set the stage for a Trusted Advocates retreat in late June.

Some Advocates said it was intended as a retreat for healing rather than for what the *Making Connection’s* staff had wanted: a discussion about how the Trusted Advocates could structure themselves within the merged entity. Instead, the Advocates raised questions about whether they could accept the merger concept, about the process itself and about whether the LME planning was being carried out in ways that adhered to the values all had agreed to.

Dara Duong, director of Cambodian Cultural Museum, in front of the Killing Fields Memorial in White Center.



“The tension also came from the process of putting together the LME, which was based on a lot of differing assumptions among the Making Connections staff, the White Center Community Development Association and the Trusted Advocates.”

—Bob Shimabukuro

At the LME retreat on July 16, the Trusted Advocates said they wanted to review as a group the decision that had been made without them. And their thoughts and decisions would be reported to the LME merger team after it had an opportunity to review the matter. The other groups at the retreat agreed that this was necessary. That in itself was a very positive indication of the strength of the Trusted Advocates and, for that matter, the initiative as a whole.

Epilogue

After the July 16th retreat, the Trusted Advocates met twice to discuss the transition. While the merger itself was in question, other contentious issues came up:

- Whether the Trusted Advocates Steering Committee had usurped its mandate since it had only been authorized to work out a plan for structuring the Trusted Advocates.
- Whether the committee had in fact informed the Trusted Advocates as a whole about what was going on.
- Why the Trusted Advocates themselves were not considered for the LME.

Some Advocates felt that Steering Committee members had put themselves in a position to “get some money” and that they had hired people without opening up the positions to residents. Most importantly, the “letting go” of their staff assistant was seen as a great insult to someone who had helped them “grow so much.”

During most of the year, the Trusted Advocates had difficulty abiding by their decisions. Making any decision, even the process by which decisions would be made, changed from meeting to meeting, which made for very frustrating times for everyone -- the staff, the work groups and the Trusted Advocates. It was obvious that trust had broken down among the Advocates themselves.

But the tension also came from the process of putting together the LME, which was based on a lot of differing assumptions among the *Making Connections* staff, the White Center Community Development Association and the Trusted Advocates. The uncertainty of the structure was clearly hampering discussions because no one wanted to “take a leap of faith” and agree to something that may not be acceptable to their constituents. The two Trusted Advocates’ meetings devoted to the LME question were highly contentious.

Also, many of the Trusted Advocates’ questions had no answers because they were the questions that were still being discussed by the Leadership Team (Fujiwara, Savusa and Bala-hadia) and the Merger Team (representatives of the partners, CDA board members and Trusted Advocates). These questions included: What would the organizational structure look like? Who would be making the decisions? What would the lines of authority be? And when would the “new normal” be fully implemented?

The Advocates were told that, if they were “in the box,” then they would have the opportunity to determine what that box would look like, helping determine the answers to their questions.

“What would the organizational structure look like?
Who would be making the decisions? What would the lines of authority be?
And when would the ‘new normal’ be fully implemented?”

—Questions raised by Trusted Advocates



While childcare at community meetings in White Center/Boulevard Park is available, parents often feel more comfortable with their children close by.

In essence, that is what the Trusted Advocates decided to do. Despite all their questions, at their September 10th meeting, the Advocates agreed, without dissent and without fanfare, that they would join the LME Merger Team and that the Merger Team would be the interim governing body of the LME. They also selected their representatives to the Merger Team.

In addition to the LME Merger Team discussions, the *Making Connections* work groups and the site team have been working on the Foundation Investment Summary/ Community Investment Plan (FIS/CIP) for 2008 (and for 2009 and 2010). In essence, this is White Center’s proposal to the Casey Foundation for how it will spend its *Making Connections* money.

Given the pressure to complete this plan and finalize the LME decision, the fact that the Trusted Advocates agreed to accept the LME proposal and join the Merger Team was critical. The Advocates found out how fast the ball was moving at the next meeting of the Merger Team, which was September 17. They were hit with discussions around:

- The FIS/CIP proposal (dubbed “Fish ‘n Chips” by those working on it) and how it related to the Local Management Entity.
- How the LME would be governed, which entailed the relationship between the LME Merger Team and the current Community Development Association board.
- The structure of the combined or “co-located” *Making Connections* Team and the CDA staff for 2008, at least until the CDA (with a new name perhaps) officially becomes the LME (now slated for July 1, 2008).

Tackling the specifics of each of these issues was an extremely complicated task, particularly when personnel issues are part of the discussions.

Using the model of a nonprofit organization, a rough description of the LME’s current structure would be that the Leadership Team (Fujiwara, Savusa and Bala-hadia) serves as the executive director, with the Merger Team (representatives of the partners, CDA board members and Trusted Advocates) being the board of directors. Its staff would be the current site team and the current

“The foundation timelines have been unrealistic because stuff like this takes a lot of time and it’s hard to put a timer on it. But I feel good about our relationship with the foundation because, when we’ve really needed some flexibility, that’s been given.”

—Sili Savusa

CDA staff, at least for the first six months of 2008.

With this structure in mind, it was very important to have the Trusted Advocates agree to be “inside the box.” Also important was their agreement that the LME Merger Team be the interim governing body of the LME, which meant that all groups had approved the LME Merger Team as the representative interim governance body.

But there’s still some fuzziness about the role of the CDA board, which is the legal decision-making body, at least for the CDA. It is expected to approve their 2008 budget (concerning only the money that they will handle for 2008), while perhaps being held responsible for all of the Casey investments in White Center/Boulevard Park. *Making Connections* will still be using the Seattle Foundation as its fiscal agent. The thought is that the Merger Team will be approving the FIS/CIP, but because they are not a legal entity, in effect the CDA would still have legal responsibility.

During the FIS/CIP discussions, some questioned why the Merger Team couldn’t simply join with the CDA board and become the governing board, at least until the decisions about the transition are made. Having two boards, one to create the new structure and one to run CDA until it officially becomes the new LME, was an inefficient or, at the very least, confusing way of doing it.

Besides structure, other issues which have come up are: what the “new normal” means in terms of salaries and benefits for staff; hiring policies; how to communicate the LME’s

messages in a way that can be understood by funders and residents alike; finding other sources of funding; who will be the executive director; the loss of some current *Making Connections* staff (because the existing staff’s skill set may not match “new normal” positions and salaries will probably be lower); and the cost of the Local Learning Partnership in relation to services (“a lot to pay for evaluation”).

December 14, when the “Fish ‘n Chips” is due, will perhaps answer some of these questions, but it will probably beget many more. To put it mildly, the transition to the “new normal” is far from easy.



Lessons... over and over again

“You can’t go wrong if the community’s involved and it’s all about opportunities for the community to be involved. So you have to have places for the community to be involved at every level, including evaluation. This is a community change initiative. So they need to be guiding the whole process.”

—Sili Savusa

Many people involved in White Center’s LME transition process believe that the pace of the work on the ground and the work on sustainability makes for a very unrealistic timeline for either to get done satisfactorily. Staff, consultants, residents and Advocates all note that the pace is unrelenting and often results in misunderstanding and irritation. They say it’s imperative that community strategies be planned with a community friendly timeline.

“Start with the values, values which would stand the test of time.
Get agreement on that and then proceed through the rest.”

—Wendy Watanabe

“The foundation timelines have been unrealistic because stuff like this takes a lot of time and it’s hard to put a timer on it,” explains Savusa. But she adds, “I feel good about our relationship with the foundation because our work’s proven and when we’ve really needed some flexibility, that’s been given.”

In a community-driven change initiative, Savusa and many others say that it is extremely important that all voices be heard in discussions and decision-making, especially voices of the community. They believe that ignoring community for the sake of expediency will result in anger, distrust and even greater delays.

They note that *Making Connections* is often characterized as an experiment. They in essence add that, “We are guinea pigs. If we’re gonna be guinea pigs, we at least need to be in charge of the experiment. The experiment should address our concerns.”

One very interesting aspect of *Making Connections*’ transition to a “Local Management Entity” is that it is focusing the question of who is in control of this experiment in community change and what exactly will be the role of “community,” especially in a place like White Center, where community is very diverse. *Making Connections* White Center/Boulevard Park has been very successful at bringing together a strong group of people who represent White Center — primarily the Trusted Advocates — with a strong and diverse array of other partners.

What has kept this diverse group together for many years is a widely shared commitment



Arone Andu, Eritrean student at Evergreen High School, listens intently to speakers at the annexation meeting.

to a set of core values, or so believe many people involved with *Making Connections*. “Start with the values, values which would stand the test of time,” said Watanabe. “Get agreement on that and then proceed through the rest.”

Fujiwara agrees. “The process of discussing the purpose, the values and the criteria was really important.”

What Watanabe, Fujiwara and others are saying is that, in an extremely diverse group, the best way to proceed is to ground the entire process with agreed-upon values. Indeed, many involved in White Center believe that it is these agreed-upon values that will enable the LME process to continue despite the edginess which currently exists.

“You can’t go wrong if the community’s involved and it’s all about opportunities for the community to be involved. This is a community change initiative. So they need to be guiding the whole process.”

—Sili Savusa

The Diarist Project

This is one of a series of publications about the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s *Making Connections* Initiative put together by The Diarist Project. The project is a new approach the foundation is using to learn from its efforts to strengthen families and transform struggling neighborhoods.

Diarists work to capture strategies and insights of the people who are leading the neighborhood transformation work. In *Making Connections*, the diarist works closely with the staff people who lead the work in each city, the Site Team Leader and Local Site Coordinator and/or liaison.



Theresa Fujiwara

This story was written by Robert Shimabukuro, the *Making Connections* White Center/Boulevard Park diarist. It was edited by Tim Saasta, diarist coordinator. Photos by Dean Wong.

Making Connections is a Casey Foundation initiative to support work that demonstrates the simple premise that kids thrive when their families are strong and their communities supportive. What began in 1999 as a demonstration project in selected neighborhoods in 22 cities is now an intricate network of people and groups committed to making strong families and neighborhoods their highest priorities.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation works to build better futures for disadvantaged children and their families in the United States. Its primary mission is to foster public policies, human service reforms and community supports that more effectively meet the needs of today’s vulnerable children and families.

For more information about **The Diarist Project**, contact: Tim Saasta at Tim@CharityChoices.com www.DiaristProject.org.

Making Connections White Center/Boulevard Park focuses on the White Center and Boulevard Park neighborhoods in unincorporated King County, Washington. These neighborhoods are extremely diverse, with more than 50 language groups represented in the schools. The Making Connections work has been led in part by the Trusted Advocates, a multicultural, multilingual body of residents, community leaders and organizers. For more information, contact: Trusted Advocates/White Center, CDA, 1615 SW Cambridge, Seattle, WA 98106; info@wccda.org.