

Providence & Beyond Cafe w/Jim Capraro Live Blog

Contributed by Michelle Gonzalez
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This is the fourth session for 2008. Our visionary practitioner is Jim Capraro to move our year into how we look at whole places. As we evolve our 2008 program, Providence & Beyond is an inquiry into how we shape the future of Providence and the region as a whole place. It serves as a "University Without Walls" for better thinking, better linking, and better doing. As we inquire, we keep asking: what will success look like, when our places are whole?

As we inquire about what lies ahead for Providence & Beyond, we keep asking:

What do we need to learn? What do we need to unlearn?

Robert is starting with an opening poem by Hafiz called: I Cherish Your Ears

Do come on July 18th as we take the conversation on the Blackstone Valley River.

Barbara Fields of LISC RI introduces Jim about the work he is doing on relational organizing. Jim and LISC are investing in 5 communities (Woonsocket, Cranston, Pawtucket, Westerly, and Olneyville-Providence) to bring the process of sustainable communities and Jim's process.

Jim begins to present and is surprised how big the audience is, about 50 people. As an early community organizer working with Gail Sincotta to change Chicago, he never thought that another Chicago community organizer that would later become a lawyer would then be running for President of the US.

Into the PPT, he starts with images of developments, but they're all commercial not residential. Housing is one starting point, and that's where he started with Gail Sincotta in the early 1970. They forced home mortgage disclosure to fight Red Lining. They proved discrimination and developed Community Reinvestment Act. Banks now have to see where the loans are? Are they lending to people in all their markets. Brought big investments into city neighborhoods, and that money became "Magnetic North."

Community reinvestment is more than housing, but it started with housing. Still CDCs would go bankrupt because housing developments didn't include total community development. People need jobs to pay their own way, and not fall into the downward spiral of subsidies. So they worked on jobs development.

Second starting point. Rosanna Marquez new Clinton HUD chief asked Jim: How did you learn to think like you do? Answer turned out to be the way they handled relationships, without a lot of expectations. Instead of concentrating on the plan, concentrate on the relationship because they will create new possibilities for the plans.

So they worked on systems: if you fix the system, all other aspects will follow. What is the self-organizing model we should strive for?

Community development is about people becoming better people. And at the core is the families.

On top of this is the commercial layer. They own 1/3 of a supermarket, but it's not economic development because there is no export. Instead, the SM was importing products. But the Nabisco plant they kept does export cookies and bring in money that goes to wages of people in the neighborhood.

Also included retraining money to convert from old baking tech to new automation. So the whole thing works together. Bedroom communities export labor to markets where the jobs are, and bring back money. And that money attracts the services because the economy is already developed.

Now they seek to unite the community development and the economic development. Requires a disparate group of leaders to combine them. This is a Quality of Life Agreement. Agreement because they agree to actually do it.

So how do you get this disparate group to engage and collaborate? They need vision.

A vision must be powerful. Really powerful. Otherwise it's just an idea.

How do you keep yourself from just getting stuck in the agenda of solving problems? Ask visioning questions: what do you want to be when you grow up?

Now the middle: housing money goes to affordable housing. But that's not nearly a broad enough definition. CDCs were doing everything, but only getting money for the housing component. Like a one-man band. It's too complex to approach from a single organizational viewpoint. And everything is underfunded.

The partnership/collaboration model: Quality of Life plan is a social contract. And the execution is like an orchestra. [The music analogy: music is only music when somebody plays it. A plan is only meaningful if you actually do it. So QoL Agreement, not Plan.]

Lead agency is the conductor. Local LISC acts to pull together national inputs: gov, funders, corps. That's the macro intermediary. Then there's a neighborhood intermediary to get money to the local partners.

We can call this whole approach relational organizing.

Step 1: identify 100 emerging leaders that we know of, but don't really know, and let's interview them in their space one on one and ask: strengths, weaknesses, opportunity and threats you see here now. When the ideas emerge, it's not our ideas, it's theirs. Actually found 114. Also, interviewer must be attentive to the interviewee and not talk or get distracted or look at the clock. Make people feel engaged and "listened to."

Begin by creating relationships and see what that energizes. Then get into the action items.

The results are paradoxical: top strength and weakness was the same thing - cohesion. Cohesion as a strength was the old neighborhood - Catholic. Cohesion as a weakness is the non-Catholic residents who ask "Where do I go?"

Step 2: Convene leaders and engage them in a visioning process. They invite the most energized 75 At the meeting there were 175. Held meeting at the hospital because it's neutral ground. Used translation equipment for non-English speakers.

Spent 20 minutes (10 listening/10 speaking) with a person who doesn't look like you. Energized and united the

group.

Two kinds of power: organized money and organized people. This second power is what they were after. They got everybody to get contact info from 5 people they don't know. Get together and repeat the 20 minute exercise. Then envision the best possible neighborhood for you AND for all the new people you've met.

Step 4: Working Groups — Planning committee was “commissioned” by the larger group to lead the effort. Created 87 items.

Step 5: Recruiting partners committed implementing specific elements. “Nothing stays in that we talked about, unless we have someone who agrees to do it.” Determine who could or who should execute an element, and then get the commitment.

As a result, only 62 items remained.