

Civic Engagement – Strategic Conversation Proceedings October 18, 2007

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This document summarizes key themes and discussion points shared during the Civic Engagement strategic conversation held as part of the Silicon Valley Community Foundation's Community Input Project. This was the seventh of nine strategic conversations convened by the community foundation as part of this project. A total of 48 participants attended the convening, representing philanthropic organizations, community advocates, donor education and voting activists as well as others engaged in the field of civic engagement. In addition, various representatives of the community foundation's board of directors and leadership team attended this convening, including CEO and President, Emmett Carson, Chief of Donor Engagement and Giving, Eleanor Clement Glass, Vice President, Community Initiatives, Convening and Research, Erica Wood and Vice President, Grantmaking, Ellen Clear.

Overview of the Community Input Project

Silicon Valley Community Foundation is committed to the best ideas and most effective solutions—at the local and the regional levels. With those goals in mind, the community foundation has initiated the Community Input Project, a series of strategic conversations, data review and community surveying around needs and issues that matter most. The issues were selected based on a review of local data, the many excellent assessments available about the health, social and environmental concerns in the region, and issues community members and leaders have raised.

The community foundation anticipates this process will spur a greater interest in regional partnerships as well as strategic solutions for meaningful, lasting and transformative change. The community foundation's board of directors will take the results of the community input process into consideration when making decisions about future directions and strategies.

This project focuses on the following nine issue areas:

- Arts and Culture
- Children and Youth
- Civic Engagement
- Community Economic Development
- Education from K-16
- Environment
- Health
- Housing and Basic Needs
- Immigration

Structure of the Strategic Conversations

Each strategic conversation follows a similar model, designed to provide participants with a common context and framing for productive discussion. Community foundation staff opens the session with a welcome and overview, and then introduces a keynote speaker who delivers an inspirational presentation with the goal of creating a sense of energy and purpose for the group's conversations to follow.

Participants engage in direct conversation with each other and the community foundation through facilitated small-group discussions organized around the key issues identified in the issue briefs prepared in advance of the conversation. Issue briefs are available for download at www.siliconvalleycf.org. These small-group discussions are generative in nature, as participants respond to two key questions:

- What are the region's key issues in the area under examination for today's conversation?
- What are the most promising solutions and ripe opportunities for significant impact?

Participants reconvene as a large group following the small-group discussions to engage in integrative thinking. As a large group, participants share "big ideas" and strategies to impact the region's most critical issues.

All aspects of the conversations are recorded, and are synthesized for the community foundation to take under consideration.

Keynote Presentation

Ernesto Cortés, southwest director, Industrial Areas Foundation, or IAF provided the keynote address at the civic engagement conversation. Cortés' affiliation with the IAF officially began in 1972 when he attended the organization's organizer training institute in Chicago. After training, Cortés worked with IAF leaders in Wisconsin and Indiana for a year developing his skills as a community organizer. In 1974 Cortés moved to San Antonio, his native city, where he founded the Communities Organized for Public Service or COPS, the well-known and highly effective church-based grassroots organization. In the following years Cortés helped found other community-based organizations in cities throughout Texas and the Southwest. Together with COPS these organizations became what are now called the Southwest IAF Network. Under Cortés' supervision, the organizations of the network have developed successful initiatives in the areas of job training, economic development, citizenship and education.

The following summarizes his key points:

- Community organizing by neighborhood has shifted to institutionally-based organizing due to changing population demographics and globalization.

- It is important to make the distinction between mobilizing (valuable, necessary and important; focused on issue/cause; then people go back to what they were doing) and organizing (identifying and mentoring leaders; teaching literacy in public life, how to be political – most people think of “political” as elections).
- Power can be defined as unilateral which is expert driven and top down, or in terms of relational power, which involves calculated vulnerability and gaining perspective into the lives of others.
- Deliberative conversations are needed with people willing to listen and interrupt to clarify and understand the concepts, history and application of civic engagement.
- Organizing is not just about having nice conversation but also agitation. Agitation stirs and brings things to the surface by sharing stories and creating curiosity. It’s about taking people’s stories and giving them meaning and significance; helping people discover that they have a lot of tacit knowledge local know-how.

Issues for Discussion: Pressing Needs and Opportunities for Impact

The three issues for discussion that participants engaged with in the community economic development conversation were:

1. Civic Engagement for Youth
2. Community and Political Engagement
3. Volunteer Voting and Giving

The following summarizes the top-level themes from the small-group discussions on these topics.

Civic Engagement for Youth

Pressing Needs

- Lack of understanding and capacity among institutions to support youth as they are in their developmental stage
- Challenges in keeping diverse cultural heritages alive
- Difficulty for youth to engage and give back to the community
- Access to engagement opportunities are limited due to fear and current immigration policies
- Lack of meaningful relationships between youth and adults
- Need to provide civic and service-learning opportunities for all youth
- Barriers to civic engagement for all youth but in particular, low-income, communities of color and incarcerated or recently released young people
- Disparity in support of youth organizations in Santa Clara County compared to San Mateo County

Promising Solutions and Opportunities for Impact

- Provide stipends for youth and incentives to parents to increase civic engagement
- Work with schools to recruit youth into experiential and service-learning programs
- Give teens authority to design and implement programs
- Create continuous pathways to civic engagement through mentoring opportunities
- Involve lawmakers and decision makers in youth-related programming
- Bring together youth from different communities and institutions
- Conduct research on best practices and disseminate findings and best practice models
- Support new partnerships between schools and chambers of commerce to provide exposure for youth to new experiences and opportunities
- Train more adults to be able to work competently and respectfully with youth
- Find ways to allow youth to discover the benefits of being engaged in a natural, organic way rather than putting an adult name on it

Community and Political Engagement

Pressing Needs

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- Lack of a comprehensive approach to immigration reform
- Lack of educational capacity resulting in educational inequity
- Fear of retaliation against organizing
- Need for deep capacity building among disenfranchised communities and within all educational and social service systems
- Lack of affordable housing, health care and a living wage
- Need education and outreach regarding rights and responsibilities for immigrant communities
- Lack of broad and inclusive definition of community/political engagement

Promising Solutions and Opportunities for Impact

- Provide classes on multi-culture and multi-generational issues
- Build on talents and resources of older adult community
- Create spaces for multicultural communities (e.g., in a city college classroom)
- Launch a listening campaign which will provide an opportunity for communities to share and see common stories
- Focus on developing leaders at a community level
- Educate communities so they know their own rights (beyond providing direct services)
- Build the capacity of parents to communicate with one another
- Create spaces for multi-community sharing to build collaboration
- Opportunities for policymakers (all types) to fully understand and value community engagement and community stories

Volunteer Voting and Giving

Pressing Needs

- Lack of defined metric for measuring “participation”
- Need to identify and support multiple venues by which individuals can “give”
- Need to address cultural/linguistic barriers
- Civic engagement not encouraged broadly
- Lack of connectedness within and across communities
- Lack of activism; there is a crisis in participation
- Lack of accountability among leaders
- Need to create coalitions that cross communities/boundaries

Promising Solutions and Opportunities for Impact

- Provide training/mentoring that illustrates how efforts have impact
- Provide financial support to train community leaders through corporate sponsorship of neighborhood groups or community colleges
- Engage immigrant community in democratic process by conducting forums on the impact of particular issues and then share how they should vote on particular participation in collaboration
- Build relationships and skills across communities
- Develop education programs aimed at young professionals “Commonwealth Club”
- Create and fund for citizenship education campaigns.
- Tap in to users and consumers of services as donors

Participants’ Overarching Suggestions

Building on the ideas and discussions generated during the facilitated small group rotations, participants shared their overarching suggestions that are at the intersection of critical issues, ripe opportunities and potential for meaningful impact. The following provides a summary overview of these suggestions. Please note that there may be overlap with ideas generated in the small-group discussions summarized above, and that some ideas may have been subsumed or categorized with others to reduce redundancies. It is also important to bear in mind that these overarching suggestions are not only for Silicon Valley Community Foundation’s consideration, but also for all those who are interested in and support civic engagement in the region.

Summary of Overarching Suggestions

- Facilitate multi-cultural, cross-generational conversations and understanding to elevate VOICE and represent what makes this valley unique
- Bring a nation, state or world leader into the region to educate those with position of power and the ability to give to fully understand and embrace immigrant integration work
- Demonstrate leadership around the importance of meaningful youth participation by education leaders from institutions on how they can/must change to create environments that are youth friendly
- Support and strengthen immigrant communities so that they can participate on a more level playing field with the broader community
- Invest in grassroots community leadership development or community organizing through all avenues
- Provide guidance and act as a convener for the individual, groups and organizations who are in the field of community and civic engagement – an opportunity for leveraging resources, networking and cross training of strategic and best practices
- Develop a program to bring civic engagement to community high schools (i.e., staff/associates are assigned a network of schools to assist/create a volunteer civic engagement program and instruct a curriculum)
- Educate donors on the value of funding advocacy
- Create community advisory committees around the nine issues that the community foundation has identified and have regular face-to-face strategizing meetings to solve social issues
- Facilitate a leadership development forum/program for nonprofit administrators, philanthropists, corporate community relations staff and local organizers
- Convene forums to share best practices among regional agencies and promote collaboration and partnerships
- Convene youth leadership workshops to provide opportunities for training and sharing stories about engaging our next generation of leaders – with a particular focus on youth from low-income communities and communities of color.
- Shine a strong focus on equality in educational outcomes – engaging donors, parents, youth and volunteers to provide tutoring, mentoring, parent training to dramatically improve graduation rates and successful capacity building among our youth
- Fund an initiative to build capacity of residents to set and achieve their self-defined goals (including financial capacity – to create sustainable funding themselves)
- Be the regional champion for taking full advantage of the unique opportunity that exists in Silicon Valley to strengthen the fabric of regional society across race, class, identity, place of origin, etc.
- Aggregate an inventory of multiple pathways to become civically engaged pathways for kids, teens, young adults, adults and elders. Include pathways for immigrants, disabled, those who are otherwise marginalized.
- Adopt an immigrant integration framework as a core and cross-cutting component of its vision creating regional and nationwide leadership.

Next Steps

Silicon Valley Community Foundation staff is reviewing and analyzing the content from all nine strategic conversations, alongside results from a community survey and comprehensive review of local research reports, to provide input and recommendations for the Board of Directors to consider in determining future directions and strategies. These strategies will include all of the community foundations tools: grantmaking, community initiatives, convening, research, donor engagement and policy/advocacy efforts.

For more information, to download the issue brief for the conversation or archived webcast presentation of the keynote address, please visit our website at www.siliconvalleycf.org. You can also email questions, comments or suggestions to Charu Seth, administrative assistant at cseth@siliconvalleycf.org.