

discover together | South St. Paul



STATUS REPORT - September 2017

This report summarizes the progress to date on Discover Together: South St. Paul, an initiative that aims to build Dakota County's capacity to work generatively with communities in order to better solve pressing problems in the county¹. The report summarizes the activities conducted in August and September 2017 and evaluates the success of the project with respect to the first four of the project's five evaluation questions (see Box 1).²



1. Do Discover Together engagement activities reach the full diversity of community members?
2. How are community resources leveraged and directed to address shared challenges?
3. How does Dakota County change management practice to support generative activities that enable communities to thrive?
4. How do government and civic officials improve relations and align activities?
5. What do Core Team members learn through their leadership on this project?

BOX 1: DEVELOPMENTAL EVALUATION QUESTIONS

¹ Information for this report was collected from biweekly Core Team meetings harvests; weekly internal team meeting agendas; Core Team member reflections from engagement events; Discover Together reports and products including descriptions of engagement events, website, and social media; and interviews with 8 of the 11 Core Team members and all Future Services Institute project staff. For more information on this report, please contact Robin Phinney, Research Director at FSI (rphinney@umn.edu or 612-624-1206).

² The final evaluation question will be addressed in the November status report.

Summary of Key Findings

- The Discover Together Core Team (see Box 2) hosted engagement events and worked to engage the full diversity of the community with targeted outreach to business, senior, and Latino communities. Yet engaging with the Latino community continued to be a challenge. Efforts were made to increase communication back to the community via social media, the project website, and local media.
- The team also worked to further the development of prototypes to respond to community need in several key areas. At the same time, there is the recognition that the project is not actively addressing many of the needs of more disadvantaged residents of South St. Paul. Core Team members also began working to identify ways to sustain this work in the future, both in South St. Paul and in other communities.
- Dakota County staff identified several internal practices that currently impede the ability of staff to work generatively with communities, including hierarchical structures of authority, restricted information flows, and the difficulty of engaging county staff across departments. From the perspective of community members, a major impediment to collaborative and generative work is time.
- Relationships between Dakota County staff and community members in South St. Paul continued to deepen in August and September and the Core Team welcomed a new community member. Interviews with Core Team members reveal that participants view these relationships as a key success of the project to date.



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BOX 2: DISCOVER TOGETHER CORE TEAM MEMBERS

Reaching a Diverse Community

One of the goals of Discover Together: South St. Paul project is to build and invest in relationships across difference. To this end, the Core Team continued to host engagement events targeting diverse populations. The team also worked to communicate project insights back to the community.

- In August and September, the Core Team hosted three additional engagement events, including an event at the South St. Paul Farmer's Market; a local business gathering at T&T Galley, a restaurant in South St. Paul; and an engagement event for seniors at the John Carroll Building. These engagement events with seniors, small business owners, and the general public covered topics including health, housing, transportation, and economic development. Core Team members learned that while participants were generally satisfied with access to medical services, housing, and transportation, accessing healthy food options is a challenge for some. Team members also learned of a desire to organize among small business owners, with the engagement at T&T Galley acting as a catalyst for self-organization.
- Engaging with the Latino community, concentrated in the southern part of town, continued to be a challenge. In part, efforts to engage this community have been hindered by the immigration threat posed by the Trump administration and its consequences for Latino students in South St. Paul schools, some of whom have experienced the deportation of a parent. Core Team members noted that in such a climate, many Latino families are reluctant to engage with government – even with the schools. Engaging Latinos through the faith community or cultural locations in West St. Paul may therefore be more successful.
- The previous status report noted a desire among Core Team members to increase efforts to share with the community what we have learned. In August and September, Core Team members utilized social media (updating the Facebook page and Twitter), local media (submitting an article to the South St. Paul city newsletter), and the project website (www.letsdiscovertogether.org) to share learning back with the community. To facilitate outreach to the Latino community, project materials – including website pages – were offered in both English and Spanish.
- For all Dakota County Core Team members, this method of engaging with community represents a strong departure from traditional forms of engagement. Core Team members welcomed the face to face interaction with community members, authentic conversations, creation of a collective space with community members, and efforts to engage with diverse stakeholders. Core Team members believe that these activities have helped to build trust and acceptance of the Discover Together project within the community, two critical successes of the project to date.



Leveraging Resources to Address Shared Challenges

A second goal of Discover Together: South St. Paul is to identify resources in order to act on ideas from all parts of the community. The Core Team made significant progress towards this goal by working to prioritize action, in addition to engagement, in multiple areas, including community space, welcoming new residents, and outreach. Yet there is a recognition that the Discover Together project is not addressing the needs of more disadvantaged residents of South St. Paul.

- A Core Team meeting on September 18th focused on reflecting on the voices heard in the engagement events and determining next steps. The team developed a set of action items that focused on themes including communication with the community, supporting grassroots efforts, welcoming diversity, and improving transportation. These action items led to the development of 7 Action Teams (see Box 3).
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- One challenge pertains to identifying and acting upon the needs of all parts of the community. Specifically, many families in South St. Paul (particularly on the south side of town) struggle with basic needs including transportation barriers, limited access to medical services, and food scarcity. Because it has been difficult to engage such families in Discover Together activities, it has been difficult to identify these needs and develop strategies for addressing them. One strategy for highlighting these needs and prototyping responses might be to more intentionally engage with those who provide services to disadvantaged families (nonprofits, county workers, school officials, etc.) and incorporate them into discussions about topics such as community space, welcoming diversity, and improving transportation.
 - A final challenge involves the time necessary to identify needs and prototype solutions. Several Core Team members noted the difficulty of moving from engagement to action over such a short span of time (12 months). Moving forward, this suggests the need to either: (a) narrow the scope of action to prototypes that can reasonably be completed over a period of several months, or (b) extend the timeline for moving from engagement to action. Clear expectations regarding the anticipated outcomes over a relatively short period are particularly important when navigating relationships with external stakeholders, such as the Dakota County Board and community groups in South St. Paul.
 - Nearly all Core Team members noted concerns related to the sustainability of activities moving forward, both with respect to the ability of Dakota County to continue generative work with communities and the ability of community members within South St. Paul to continue work on particular action items (such as the welcome packet) absent county involvement.

1. Get Connected SSP (produce and sustain production of the welcome packet)
2. Library-Historical Society (continue community space engagement activities)
3. Community programs (magnify grassroots efforts such as Men of Action)
4. Outreach (share back with community through reports, media, and presentations)
5. Local business (provide support to self-organization of small business group and explore economic development opportunities)
6. Housing (convene and host community conversations)
7. Transportation (promote existing transportation options/work to expand options)

BOX 3: ACTION TEAMS

Changing Management Practice to Support Generative Activities

A third goal of Discover Together: South St. Paul is to enable government to co-create solutions to community needs alongside community actors. As part of this effort, Dakota County has been begun working to identify how management practices within the county need to change in order to support generative work with communities.

- There is a strong commitment among Dakota County leadership to working generatively with communities. One success of Discover Together has been to demonstrate the value of generative work in practice, which will help build support for the more difficult management changes that are necessary to expand this approach to other initiatives and parts of the county.
- Embedding a collaborative way of working within the existing county structure is a challenge. Dakota County Core Team members identified several internal practices that hinder community engagement and generative work with communities. These include:
 - The hierarchical nature of authority within departments. Community engagement work requires an adaptive and nimble project structure, which is difficult to realize when decision-making is hierarchical and team members do not necessarily have the authority to execute project decisions without approval.
 - The restricted nature of information flows within and across programmatic silos. Team members highlighted a need to increase communication about Discover Together across departments, in order to build interest and engagement among other staff members. One way to address this might be to create a community engagement committee staffed with personnel from multiple departments, though there are concerns about such a committee becoming overly formalized.
 - The difficulty of engaging county staff across departments. To address this challenge, Dakota County has held a series of brown-bags and world cafés with staff to better understand their interests, needs, and perspectives.

Changing Management Practice to Support Generative Activities continued...

- Several Core Team members also noted the importance of clearly communicating to staff *about the project* at an earlier point in time. Several team members noted that there was: (a) a lack of clarity surrounding the purpose of the project initially, and (b) not enough time spent introducing and orienting staff to the project. Refining the project goals and providing orientation to staff will be an important aspect of replicating Discover Together in other communities.
- For Core Team members from the community, the primary obstacle to the work has been time. Unlike most county workers, community members' involvement in Discover Together is not directly tied to their job. Rather, community members chose to participate in Discover Together *in addition to* their regular job. Community members who have been actively involved in Discover Together activities have had to forego other professional events in order to participate. This is not necessarily a bad thing, as Core Team members recognize the value that partnerships and collaborative work have for projects in the community. But it is something to keep in mind as Dakota County works to develop similar projects in other communities.

Improving Relations and Aligning Activities

Finally, Discover Together: South St. Paul aims to improve relations and align activities in order to magnify assets within the community and co-create solutions to community needs.

- Improving relations and aligning activities depends upon the active involvement of both county staff and community members. The Core Team was delighted to welcome a new community member, Lois Swanson, to the team in September.
- Nearly all Core Team members view the new and deepening relationships between the county staff and community members to be a primary success of the project. For Dakota County Core Team members, the opportunity to get to know South St. Paul has been rewarding both professionally and personally. Core Team members from the community have long recognized the value of relationships to their professional work and value the new connections made to multiple departments within Dakota County.

