

Community Ties: Goals, Challenges, and Solutions in the Implementation of the Burton Street Resource and Technology Center

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Abstract:

A resource and technology center is a shared place where community members can convene for such tasks as online job searching and curriculum, neighborhood board meetings, community support, information on events in the area, to use resources to research how to start and maintain a business, etc. This project's intention is to document and represent efforts to develop and implement a proposed Community Based Resource and Technology Center (CBRTC) in the basement of the Burton Street Recreation Center as well as a One-Mic recording studio located on the main floor of the community center. The Burton Street Community Center is located in a historically working class African American community in West Asheville, North Carolina. The Burton Street Neighborhood is still primarily working class African American although it is presently undergoing gentrification. This project will map the goals, challenges and remedies for successfully bringing community members together with city agencies, non-profits, and other businesses in order to find working solutions to real life public policy problems. In this case how city and community can work together to bring know how (i.e. technical knowledge) and resources (funding and business opportunities) in order to provide places where people can partake in activities that range from online job searching, to recording family oral histories, and the making and recording of music. To date, despite the effort of many, the various pieces of the implementation puzzle have not been put together to begin the construction of a CBRTC. The one-mic recording studio is in the approval stages of development and should be completed early 2014. This research aims to identify where the various actors in the CBRTC process are, establish key areas that need improved communication and collaboration, distinguish ways in which actors, community members, city agencies, and non-profits can solve communication and resource issues, as well as distinguishing key factors that made the one-mic recording studio successful as an example for the CBRTC. It is hope that such identification and description of

the process will facilitate the next step solutions to achieve the ultimate goal of a CBRTC which all parties agree would be a positive asset, not only to the neighborhood, but to the community at large; serving as a model for other communities. Finally, this project will also include a schematic representation of what other communities within Asheville area as well as in the United States have done to achieve similar goals.

Key Words: community development, public policy, resource and technology center, community—government collaboration

Origins of the Project

The idea for this project arose in a political science class with a concentration in civic engagement titled, Civic Engagement in Community. The core of this class involves working alongside the Burton Street Community in various ways that illustrate the benefits of community development i.e. working with children in an afterschool program, planting and harvesting food in the community garden, collecting oral histories from the elders of the neighborhood etc. After discussing in class which particular avenue of civic engagement each student would like to participate in, I decided to research a proposed resource and technology center. I had done some previous literary research on community development and was interested in why this entity had not been established plus, I wanted to learn more on the process of doing so. My review of the literature on community development (Defilippis and Saegert:2012), public policy, and community power studies in political science (Polsby: 1980) helped drive my research.

Once everyone in the class had established where they'd like to work, the class met with DeWayne Barton, a prominent Burton Street Community member. In this meeting, Barton expressed he would like someone from our class to track the progress of a proposed recording studio that would be put into action in a front room of the Burton Street Community Center. Barton shared this project was part of an effort to interest and involve the youth of the community to play a larger role in neighborhood activities. Since this recording studio shared a similar process in implementation as the proposed resource and technology center, I volunteered to be a researcher for this particular project. After discussing the idea I had to research the resource and technology center, he felt I could research both projects since the idea for the recording studio stemmed out of community discussions of a resource and technology center. A fellow classmate also expressed interest in the project during the meeting and Barton provided us with contact information for community residents, non-profit directors, and Asheville City officials who could provide us more information concerning the recording studio and resource and technology center.

After my classmate and I had this information we immediately began e-mailing the contacts Barton had provided to express our interest in meeting face-to-face to discuss the CRBTC and one-mic studio. We also established goals we'd like to achieve and developed a set of interview questions we would use in our meetings. In the beginning stages of this project, it was important to us that we answer three core questions:

1. What is the desire of the Burton Street Community to create a recording studio and resource and technology center in the Burton Street Community Center?
2. What are the dilemmas the community faces in achieving this goal?
3. What are successful steps toward implementation of both projects

We also decided that a clear timeline of the process would be beneficial in establishing next step solutions in the implementation process (Appendix I) for DeWayne Barton and the Burton Street Neighborhood Association Board (BSNAB) as well as for future UNCA students who participate within the Burton Street Community. A report of our findings would be presented to the BSNAB during their annual Thanksgiving potluck. The results of the project's findings are to serve the Burton Street Community as information to learn and benefit from. Also, although I did partake in meetings and the creation of a report and timeline with another classmate, this analysis of the process during this research project is my own and independent of the class itself.

Essentially my project is a case study of who governs and how local neighborhoods impact policy process and policy outcomes. There have been three theories of how government and power work at the local level. The first theory holds that policy outcomes are determined by a relatively small group of decision makers or "power elites" that control policy outcomes (Hunter: 1953). The second theory holds that policy outcomes are the product of a pluralist system in which multiple groups compete for policy outcomes and local elected officials respond to those demands. The third theory is the "institutional" or "bureaucratic" model which argues policy outcomes are determined by the citizen as client or "customer"-bureaucratic relationship. My project is an exploration and qualitative analysis of which one of these theories best explains the attempt of citizens in one neighborhood to obtain a resource and technology center in their community center. Another goal of this project is to configure successful strategies that would allow community members, non-profit organizations, and city agencies to work together to achieve the desired end of developing a CBRTC.

Methods and Work Undertaken

This project consisted of gathering information through informal meetings as well as employing ethnographic skills which included precise journaling of my observations, reactions, and personal thoughts within all interactions. My partner and I e-mailed various persons who were or are currently involved in the process to implement a CBRTC and/or One-Mic studio to set up informal meetings and discuss such process. It was tricky to align these meetings with our school/ work schedules and we found ourselves spending a great deal of time initiating and physically getting to these meetings. Once we made it to the meeting place, which was usually at the representative's place of employment, we asked simple questions regarding their role in the process. These questions were loosely constructed and the bulk of our conversation consisted of discussing the interviewee's opinion of what the dilemma's that prevented the creation of the CBRTC. The entire interview usually took 45 minutes to an hour. This process was successfully completed with eight different individuals over the span of three months.

After the first meeting, with a community member responsible for initially researching the desires and need for a resource and technology center, I quickly realized this project was a larger undertaking than I originally believed. This project evolved to understanding public policy,

concerning community development, as well as tracking the history of previous efforts to actualize a CBRTC. I needed to redefine my personal expectations of this project and become more flexible in my approach to these issues to be better able to adapt to changing expectations. Once I accepted this fluid approach, with the information I gathered in the following meetings I was able to put together pieces of a timeline of the previous efforts to establish a CBRTC (Stoecker: 2005).

Overall, the question of who governs, (Dahl:1953) which is critical to the study of politics, ethics and social institutions, was the definitive question during my research. In democratic political theory and popular understanding of government the argument is made the “people” rule and that democratic institutions are accountable to the governed. Yet we know that reality can be different from an idealized version of the way democratic institutions ought to behave, my project is a look at how democratic theory actually works (or doesn’t) in practice. We also know that in contemporary American government, we have a representative system of government that makes use of public administration to accomplish and execute goals. I was experiencing real life tensions between the way institutions and citizens are supposed to work in an “ideal” world, and how it was working out in the day-to-day practices of everyday experience. What I learned from this is the ethics (or doing the right thing) takes on a pragmatic feel when people are working together to get projects implemented. The biggest lesson I learned was the importance of direct and clear communication.

Since I met with so many people from varying backgrounds, it was very important I understand that different people will have different agendas and perspectives. When I put this concept into practice I was able to empathize with whomever I was speaking with which gave me a deeper understanding of a person’s motives. It became clear that I had been partaking in a narrative policy analysis (Roe: 1994). The stories of every actor involved were evolving into the narrative of public policy at a local level. The benefits and disadvantages of one actor were equitable to all involved. The interconnectedness that became an element of the process helped me to critically analyze this entire project within the scope of community development.

Additionally, my field work experience in community service learning taught me the importance of grounded theory and narrative policy analysis that allowed me to listen to the stories told along the policy process and therefore come up with my own explications and recommendations for the successful implementation of desired policy outcomes. What I learned was that there was a bit of truth in all three theories (the elite, pluralist and bureaucratic) but a key factor in the success of any policy outcome was that citizens and agency officials needed to listen and learn from each other’s distinct perspective on the policy problem at hand.

Ties to Academia

I am an Ethics and Social Institutions (ESI) major with a minor in Africana Studies. Within my ESI major I have explored many fields of study from economics, history, anthropology, political science, and sociology. I discovered that I am extremely drawn to social justice, community development, and history of urban renewal; all areas which played a role in this project. I have an internship with a local non-profit concerned with the well-being and welfare of women and

children where I work in a resource center in a housing project within Asheville. My passions are promoting avenues of community empowerment and doing civic engagement that promotes social change. My hopes are to attain a master's degree in public administration with a concentration in non-profit administration. This project was a small taste of what I strive to continue in form of a career or continued education.

Due to my background in ethics and social institutions, I was able to view this research in relation to three ethical theories. First is utilitarian theory, attaining the maximum good for the maximum populous. Second is communitarian theory, which believes in equality for all. Third being libertarian theory, which strives for more freedom and less governmental order. (Singer: 1994) in my research I became aware that these three concepts are neither concretely achieved nor absolutely dismissed in local government. Rather they are fluid and more dependent on who is asking for what specifically and how people respond.

For this project I found the work of James DeFilippis and Susan Saegert in their book, *The Community Development Reader*, very helpful in understanding the stance of the community verse the city. After I had identified a dilemma of control and power over the creation of the CBRTC, I wanted to understand why it existed. DeFilippis and Saegert state, "...communities increasingly do not themselves control or contain the forces of either production or reproduction. Communities are therefore in the contradictory positions of being vital for the maintenances of the larger political economy, but significantly constrained in what they can achieve in terms of shaping or transforming that economy" (Defilippis and Saegert: 2012 p3) This theory, that communities are shaped by economic and social forces outside the neighborhood boundaries and at the same time in need of responding to them at the local level, explains the constant ebb and flow of dialogue between the city and community. Also, the building belongs to the city but remains a significant structure for the community, honed a community center within the neighborhood. The basic issue here is that the community center is legally controlled by city government but the neighborhood citizens see it from a cultural and historical perspective. Both groups feel "ownership" but the community doesn't have unlimited legal and political authority over how the center can be used to respond to ever-changing demographic or economic conditions.

Challenges Faced and Responses to those Challenges

Once I began this project, I quickly realized I would be facing challenges I did not initially expect. I originally began the project expecting to spend 60 hours meeting with actors involved in the project and researching other resource and technology centers. I was surprised at the time and energy spent to arrange, agree on, and act out meetings. Also, once I met with a person who had been involved in the project they would provide me with multiple names of others who had also been involved. I was also fascinated how this small project about a resource and technology center became a deeper exploration into public policy within the sphere of local government.

This was my first attempt in undertaking a project that dealt with public policy and community development. The entire process of gathering information and reflecting on the process by journal was a rewarding experience. It was a self-taught experience backed by academic

readings. My response to the challenges that I encountered was first, acknowledging the lack of communication between agencies and second, posing specific questions to those I met with to address these communication issues. Being prepared and well-informed on the city's policies also made my interviews more profitable. This is due to the fact that I could show my interviewees I truly had an interest in the process.

Results

After meeting with local city officials, a director of a non-profit, a business owner, and Burton Street Community members a timeline of the previous efforts of implementation of a resource and technology center began to take shape. An idea which steamed from a Burton Street board meeting in 2007 flourished into an effort for real social change. This change has not yet occurred and hopes have somewhat diminished. The real trick is to truly understand the multifaceted process and relationships between the city and community that exist within such process. Especially important is the language used to describe the site of the proposed resource and technology center. While some in local government refer to the center as a 'recreation center', the Burton Street Neighborhood Board refers to the center as a 'community center'. It is very obvious that a level of communication between all organizations is crucial for a healthy relationship between all and real social change. The level of distrust, whether it stems from a hurtful past or an uncertain present, is an obstacle that I am unsure how to resolve.

The timeline (Appendix I) that spawned from my research is the backbone to taking next steps in constructing a CBRTC within the Burton Street Community Center. Information that is detailed within it will help community members, city officials, and local non-profit organizations start an equitable conversation about what to do next. The act of conducting this research has also seemed to ignite dulled interest in those who took part in the process in the past as well as attracting new players who can benefit future plans. The timeline also illuminates the importance of open and truthful conversation between agencies. The collaboration between all organizations came to a halt when people stopped talking with one another. The simple task of talking keeps the dream alive and well but what will complete the goal is definite action toward social change.

Sustainability

A great majority of my meetings with previous actors in this process had to do with discussing the reality of sustainability for a resource and technology center in the basement of a community that is rich in history and in need of community development. The threat of the expansion to the 1-26 highway and gentrification of the neighborhood shows that there are many differing interests involved in the development of the community. Persons involved in attempting to achieve the implantation of a CBRTC and the One-Mic studio may or may not continue their efforts to fully implement a CBRTC are unfulfilled.

Since this entire process has been reliant on partnerships, there is a possibly a chance the project will face the challenge of not having the institutional capacity defined in terms of professional

staff member to meet its goals key player in the partnership leaves (Synder). It is vitally important that those who were involved in the past and those who are still involved in the present stay in contact with one another. My role in this process has been one of a researcher and listener. I hope to continue my investigation beyond my academic ties and plan to further my relationship with the Burton Street Community.

In Asheville and across the United States, resource and technology centers are lively centers within communities provided vital sources of skills and information. During this research project, I looked into two key examples of the beneficial attributes a resource center could bring to the Burton Street neighborhood. The Family Resource Center at Emma in West Asheville which also houses the organization Children First assists families with various resources and education opportunities (childrenfirstbc.org). Another example of a thriving community resource and technology center is the Community Technology Network (CTN) in San Francisco California. The CTN works to bring community together through technology education and “digital literacy” (ctnbayarea.org)

Conclusion

This project has had a tremendous effect on my outlook on civic engagement by enlightening me to the interconnectedness that ties all avenues for social change together. I was able to connect my years of academia in sociology and political science, to my yearning for social change in a way that cemented my drive to make civic engagement a major part my life’s passion. Apart from my own learning, I have come to see the importance of bringing strong communities through consistent forms of communication between citizens and local government. I see my role in community development as an advocate, listener, and collector of histories. I have a keen interest and skill in communicating with people from various walks of life to learn their life story.

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APPENDIX I: Timeline of Previous Efforts to Implement a CBRTC and One-Mic Recording Studio in the Burton Street Community Center

June 2007-

- Two Burton Street residents discuss the possibility of establishing a CBRTC in the Burton Street Community Center after a community function

July 2007-

- Residents of Burton Street Community meet and begin to conceptualize an idea to develop a CBRTC in the basement of the Burton Street Community Center during Burtons Street Neighborhood Association (BSNA) meetings
- Hold open project steering committee meeting

November-December 2007-

- A short community survey was designed and implemented partnering with Dawa Hitch, the Weed and Seed Site Coordinator for Burton Street

2008-

- Discussion with other community members at BSNA meetings

2009-

- Federal stimulus funds through Broadband Technology Opportunity Program become available
- Joint application process with other community organizations allowed for continued discussion at BSNA meetings
- Burton Street Initiative with Asheville Design Center (ADC) and Western North Carolina Alliance (WNCA)

2010-

- Burton Street Initiative with ADC and WNCA
- Discussion of how this project will impact the Burton Street youth through Green Opportunities (GO)
- Finalization of community plan
- December 2010- BSNA conducts community review and votes on the aspects of the plan which are considered a priority

2011-

- February and March BSNA meetings include a basement tour and review of plan options

- BSNA discusses hiring a resident as a temporary community organizer to re-assess/survey community interested in specific technologies and skill development wanted and needed
- Community, project concept, and technologies have changed considerably in previous four years

April 2011-

- First proposal for a CBRTC in the basement of the Burton Street Recreation Center given to Parks and Recreation Department. Proposal created by community members and with the help of the ADC
- Parks and Recreation met with the BSNA and other community members involved in writing the application to visit the basement of the community center
- Parks and Recreation return application with revisions so community can comply to revisions and reapply application

June 2011-

- Parks and Recreation staff technical assistance assigned to community to help with revisions
- Second proposal for CBRTC in basement of the Burton Street Recreation Center given to Parks and Recreation Department including a motion to attach solar panels to the roof of the center with the assistance of a non-profit organization AIR located out of Boone, NC

September 2011-

- Parks and Recreation returns proposal again still concerned with two main issues:
 - 1. What is the BSNB's ability to fund the CRBTC long-term? (How sustainable is the project?)
 - 2. If, in the future, the BSNB would not be operating or not operating with the same individuals, what would happen to the equipment and space of the CRBTC? Would the BSNB donate the center to Parks and Recreation since Parks and Recreation owns the building?
(Parks and Recreation is aware a previous computer lab existed and "faded out" in the community center; they do not want to see this happen again)
- Community revises plan and **Parks and Recreation approves proposal**

November 2011-

- Proposal goes to Recreation Board and is approved
- Community's next steps are following through on proposed funding of CRBTC and meeting all city requirements in building CRBTC i.e. building codes, parking, etc.

- Communication ends between Community and Parks and Recreation; specifically no more notifications project is continuing from ADC rep for Burton Street to Parks and Recreation.

2012-

- A Burton Street Community member's company ARP donates \$5,000 to fund a project to create a business plan to fund what is now called the Burton Street Music and Arts Center. In the agreement, youth must be a vital part in creating the business plan.

July 2013-

- Burton Street Community members backed by Green Opportunities (GO) and LEAF in Schools and Streets (LSS) give Parks and Recreation an application to implement a One-Mic recording studio in the present weight room in the Burton Street Recreation Center. (Parks and Recreation seem more apt to approve and fully support this project as it is back by two businesses who have worked with the department before. Parks and Recreation feels this operation would support the "master plan" of the department)\

October 2013-

- Parks and Recreation meets with community members, GO, and LSS representatives to provide revisions to application
(One-Mic studio is still not implemented)