

Dubuque: Creating a Culture of Engagement

BY SARAH LIPSCOMB

In January 1982, Dubuque, Iowa, had the highest unemployment rate in the country, at 23 percent. This was, in large part, due to two major manufacturers, John Deere and the Dubuque Packing Company, substantially reducing employment. Residents began to leave, and following a population loss of 7.8 percent from 1980 to 1990, a local business released a t-shirt reading “Will the last one leaving Dubuque please turn out the lights?.” A diminished tax base, abandoned downtown storefronts, falling home prices, and aging infrastructure such as streets, the riverfront area, and sewer and water systems plagued Dubuque in the 1980s. The city had the highest unemployment rate of Iowa’s largest cities, and it lost retail business as well as industry. Ten percent of its housing was vacant or for sale. These dire economic circumstances gave Dubuque two choices: wait for the national economy to recover or invest in a new vision.

Dubuque’s private and public sector leaders came together to help restore Dubuque and invest in downtown redevelopment and industrial expansion. Several collaborative institutions were created by this group including Dubuque Infuturo (now Dubuque Initiatives), Greater Dubuque Development Corporation (www.greaterdubuque.org), the Dubuque Racing Association, and Dubuque Main Street (www.dubuquemainstreet.org). In 1991, the city helped establish the first of Dubuque’s visioning processes—Envision 2000. This visioning process took place for the Tri-State area and involved over 5,000 citizens. Building off the policies, goals, and objectives of the Vision 2000 process, in 1995 the Dubuque City Council approved the first Comprehensive Plan for the city since 1936. The success of Vision 2000 in creating the Comprehensive Plan paved the road for visioning efforts to become part of Dubuque’s civic DNA. Shortly after the adoption of the 1995 Comprehensive Plan, the America’s River Vision effort was launched.

Developing partnerships and creating broader collaborations became the new norm for the Dubuque area following successful visioning efforts in the early 1990s. The next issue to tackle for the community was the Port of Dubuque. With run-down buildings, deserted storage tanks, and polluted ground, the Port of Dubuque was not being leveraged to benefit the community recreationally or economically. The Dubuque County Historical Society preserves and educates the history of Dubuque and Mississippi River. In the early 1990s, the group began to envision an expansion on the riverfront and sought out partners to make it a reality. Wanting to boost the community spirit and revitalize the economy, local government, businesses, and nonprofit organizations saw this as the perfect opportunity to reach their common goal. What began as a \$25 million project, quickly grew to \$188 million with the outpouring of support from the community to complete phase I in 2003. Improvements included The Mississippi Riverwalk, the Indoor Water Park, the National Mississippi River Museum and Aquarium, the Grand River Center, the Grand Harbor Resort, and the historic Star Brewery complex.

The America’s River Project showcased the success that can happen when private and public partnerships are leveraged, but the city knew they wanted to take the community to the next level with bigger ideas. The city staff asked themselves how they could better engage the community and let citizens drive the vision. Assistant City Manager Cindy Steinhauser commented that their unsuccessful bid for the All-America City Award in 1996 helped them realize that the group was focused internally and did not reach out of their comfort zone for input. Branching out from the institutional usual suspects would help mobilize the community to its fullest potential. She describes the time period of beginning in 2005 as the time of “engaged community.”

In 2005, the Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque (www.dbqfoundation.org) and the Dubuque Area Chamber of Commerce (www.dubuquechamber.com) spearheaded the Envision 2010 campaign to directly engage residents in planning for Dubuque's future. The end product would be 10 Big Ideas with broad acceptance that would have a long-term, positive impact on the growth and quality of life of the greater Dubuque community. The process produced over 2,000 ideas through focus groups and town meetings attended by thousands. After a nine-month process, the final 10 Big Ideas were released in January 2006: (1) America's River Phase II, (2) Bilingual Education Curriculum, (3) Community-wide Wireless, (4) Community Health Center, (5) Indoor and Outdoor Performing Arts Center, (6) Integrated Walking/Biking/Hiking Trail System, (7) Library Services Expansion, (8) Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services, (9) Passenger Train Service, and (10) Warehouse District Revitalization.

Each project has been completed or is underway with a group of 100-plus active volunteers continuing to help make them a reality. From the beginning, the creation of an inclusive process that enabled citizens to name the things they considered valuable was just as important as accomplishing the goals of the final plan. The process aimed to set up mechanisms for citizens to be involved easily in planning and to create a meaningful engagement and implementation experience that mutually benefited the community and the residents. Envision 2010 was also an avenue for new leadership and talent to emerge to help shape the community. This process was the catalyst from many community groups and projects outside of the 10 Big Ideas.

After serving 10 years on the city council, Roy D. Buol ran for the office of mayor in 2005. His platform was based on "engaging citizens as partners," and what he heard from thousands of citizens was a consistent theme surrounding water quality, recycling, green space, public transit, cultural vitality, accessibility, and downtown revitalization. During the 2006 city council goal-setting process, Mayor Buol proposed and received full support from his council colleagues to focus on sustainability as a top priority, which would have competitive economic advantages in the future. What soon became known

as Sustainable Dubuque is a city council-adopted, community-created, and citizen-led initiative whose story officially began in 2006. A city council priority each year since, the city continually works to expand awareness, create partnerships, and encourage initiatives involving all sectors of the community.

Sustainable Dubuque created 12 guiding principles for a sustainable future: Regional Economy, Smart Energy Use, Resource Management, Community Design, Green Buildings, Healthy Local Foods, Community Knowledge, Reasonable Mobility, Healthy Air, Clean Water, Native Plants and Animals, and Community Health and Safety. Steinhauser attributes the success of the initiative, reflected by a Green Asset Map that illustrates accomplishments in such areas as transportation, healthy homes, local food, arts and culture, jobs, and energy independence, to its community-generated variety.

The success of the Sustainable Dubuque Initiative is also in part to the Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque's Dubuque 2.0 project (now a part of the Sustainable Dubuque Initiative). The foundation creatively engaged residents to learn about the environment and the impact on their local community. A website was created featuring games, contests, and other ways for community members to get involved and learn more about sustainability issues. Offline engagement efforts at places like farmers markets and cultural events connected more community members by capitalizing on already popular gathering spaces. Armed with more knowledge about sustainability efforts, residents were able to make informed decisions that helped reduce their water usage by 6.6 percent on average, and 69 percent of Dubuque 2.0 website users indicated that they were doing more to promote sustainability in their own lives and throughout the community. The traditional engagement model of a citizen-led taskforce coupled with the creative, grassroots outreach from the Community Foundation created the successful initiative that has won the community many awards and continues to be a proud piece of Dubuque's identity.

With a decade of increased civic engagement and a variety of successful projects, city staff decided it was time to apply again for the All-America City Award to be recognized for their efforts, continue

learning from other communities on engagement practices, and to boost their community pride and spirit. Having learned from their unsuccessful bid in 1996, the group created a new process to complete the application that mirrored how they had approached engagement since then: (1) gathering partners, (2) getting commitments, (3) identifying short-term and long-term issues, (4) assessing strengths, (5) analyzing who is missing from the table, and (6) gaining broad community input and buy-in. This time around staff was particularly interested in youth input. From the beginning of the application process, they saw involving youth as a critical component to create “co-learning” between the youth and adults of the community.

The campaign to apply for the award was kicked off to the broader community by asking citizens, “What do you think makes us an All-America City?” With this input, the application and presentation group submitted a more inclusive and collaborative application and was named an All-America City in 2007. Steinhauer commented that the application process proved to community members that their ideas and hard work over the previous decade had become a reality and improved the quality of life in Dubuque. The process helped community members tell the Dubuque story and see their connection to it, which boosted community confidence after winning the award.

In 2012, Dubuque was moved to action again when they learned of the focus on 3rd grade reading for the 2012 All-America City Award. This was an opportunity to rally the community around support for their children and education. Every Child/Every Promise, a new affiliate of the Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque, launched the effort around the sentiment that everyone in the community had a role to play by asking, “How can you connect to 3rd grade reading?” The answers from unsuspecting education players pushed the action plan farther than the community could have imagined. One example came from a probation officer who recommends community service requirements to the juvenile court judge. He committed to recommending hours of service be dedicated to reading and mentoring elementary school students. Steinhauer explains that by giving people the opportunity to connect to a shared vision and commit to it

in a way they are most comfortable the strengths of residents can be better leveraged to create a stronger community for everyone. This authentic form of engagement helped Dubuque win a 2012- and a 2013 All-America City designation.

The city’s process for engagement continues to develop and evolve based on experience and projects. The city recognized the value of coordinated efforts of engagement beginning with the planning stage in part due to the Bee Branch Watershed Flood Mitigation project that will help provide relief for approximately 500 homes and businesses in an area that has experienced six Presidential Disaster Declarations since 1999 costing an estimated \$70 million. According to one city staff member, a consultant was hired to create a plan to restore the Bee Branch area. After releasing the plan to the public, the city received a lot of backlash. The city responded to their concerns and hired a new consultant who conducted extensive outreach in the neighborhood with community members while compiling the plan. As a result, residents reported feeling included in making decisions about the \$200 million project and felt that their needs were being met in those circumstances. Two prime examples of the community acceptance were the implementation of a storm-water management fee and that over 100 properties were acquired to daylight the Bee Branch creek without using eminent domain through the courts.

Since the 1980s, Dubuque has moved from one-off engagement and visioning projects to integrating community engagement throughout local government projects. In 2012, the city increased its civic resources by hiring their first Community Engagement Coordinator to continue streamlining and advancing engagement efforts to ensure that citizen’s needs were being met. One program run by the coordinator is City Life. Dubuque’s Safe Community Task Force identified the need for a group of informed citizens who understand the organizational structure of local government and how best to connect to departments to act as a welcoming liaison to the community. After much research, the Human Rights Department (which includes the Community Engagement Coordinator) created Dubuque’s version of a “citizen academy” in 2013 which they named City Life. According to the coordinator, the fourth time they offered the program

the number of interested participants dropped from 22 to 5. By applying a community engagement framework that involved 50-plus stakeholders that captured how citizens viewed engagement, the program was redesigned and the enrollment rate returned to 20-plus participants. The Community Engagement Coordinator has also assisted with the Inclusive Dubuque Campaign which began in 2013.

Dubuque's racial and ethnic composition shifted in the period 2000 to 2010. According to the 2000 Census, Dubuque was 96.2 percent white, 1.6 percent Latino, and 1.2 percent black compared to the 2010 Census, which reported Dubuque's population as 91.7 percent white, 2.4 percent Latino, and 4.0 percent black. This shift was naturally reflected in the workforce and employees brought to their employers' attention that they did not feel welcome or connected to the community of Dubuque. The business community, the Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque, local not-for-profits, and local government worked together to help address the issue by creating Inclusive Dubuque.

Inclusive Dubuque, which aims "to have a community where people feel respected, valued, and engaged," deploys a collective impact model involving more than 50 network partners that span all sectors and meet monthly. The initiative gathers demographic data, conducts surveys, and convenes community dialogues, focusing on housing, economic wellbeing, education, health, safe neighborhoods, transportation, and arts and culture. The initiative defines diversity as, including but not limited to, (1) age or generation, (2) culture, (3) disabilities, (4) gender, (5) nationality, (6) race and ethnicity, (7) religion, (8) sexual orientation, (9) socioeconomic status, and (10) veteran status. After determining the various identities that factor into diversity, defined as the "unique perspectives and life experiences an individual or group brings to our community" and reflected by the characteristics listed previously, Inclusive Dubuque will incorporate inclusiveness practices into its community discussions and solutions. Finally, the initiative aims to achieve equity and access to opportunities for all and to the resources needed to thrive.

The need for Inclusive Dubuque demonstrated that accounting for who was and was not at the decision

table was an important piece of any visioning or strategic planning process and that building trust with groups left out was needed. The local government's Human Rights Department has taken on this concern and is addressing it in their creation of an Equity and Engagement Toolkit. This is part of the city's efforts, as one of the Inclusive Dubuque Network Partners, to provide mutually reinforcing activities in the collective impact model to achieve the agreed-upon goals. Preparation of the toolkit began when a cross-departmental local government team created a shared meaning of engagement in the context of Dubuque's local government. The toolkit will touch on every aspect of engagement including how to choose stakeholders, designing around limitation of participants, and when to use different engagement tools. An important section of the toolkit, "Reachin," will prompt project coordinators to compare their stakeholder list to the toolkit's list of diverse groups to consider. A section later in the process will ask coordinators if they feel comfortable working with specific diverse groups, if they know how to contact them, and if they know what that group's needs are. If no is the answer to any of those questions, a meeting with the Human Relations Specialist will be scheduled to provide assistance. The toolkit aims to ask the right questions to trigger a thoughtful look at inclusion and equity in decision making. The toolkit is still in the development phase and will be tested on several different projects and presented to the public for input before finalizing.

The local government in Dubuque continually attempts to improve their engagement efforts by organizing their civic actions, so that they complement each other and engage people to learn together along the way. Spurred by a depressed economy, Dubuque leveraged partnerships and citizen's strengths to put the city back on the map. The evolution of their visioning process to address challenges and emphasize partnerships has led to broader engagement and more sustainable solutions for the community at large.

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