2010 Transforming Local Government Conference
The Future of Service in Local Government
June 2 – 4, 2010 ~ Southern Nevada

Case Study Submittal For

Investing in Community Interactions

Sarasota County Presentation Team Members

James Ley
County Administrator
1660 Ringling Blvd.
Sarasota, FL 34236
Tel: 941.861.5111
Fax: 941.861.5987
jley@SCGOV.net

Susan Scott
Deputy County Administrator
1660 Ringling Blvd.
Sarasota, FL 34236
Tel: 941.861.5293
Fax: 941.861.5960
sscott@SCGOV.net

Investing in Community Interactions

> *"For years, we who are involved in local government have treated citizen engagement as an option to enhance policymaking and community building in local government. I would argue that now engagement no longer is an option; it is imperative. It is made mandatory by the challenging and often confusing context of contemporary local governance, increasingly characterized by the ad hoc presence of foundations, nongovernmental organizations, private firms, and other nongovernmental actors in processes and decisions that significantly affect community development and well-being."*
>
> - John Nalbandian, Predicting the Future: Why Citizen Engagement No Longer Is Optional

INTRODUCTION

In the above referenced article, John Nalbandian, Professor at the University of Kansas' Department of Public Administration, discusses the "two overarching global trends" before the public administrator: *administrative modernization* and the *search for identity*. *Administrative modernization* can most easily be interpreted as improving the processes of government and delivering enhanced service to customers. The *search for identity* is simple – citizens want to know they matter, that their voice is part of community, that their input and interaction is valued. The future of public service in local government must include actions and efforts in each of these areas.

Sarasota County's 2010 TLG case study centers on three recently completed community-centric efforts that sought open ended and broad based input and interactions with citizens. These projects were initiated as important investments in community ownership and understanding. The projects were:
- Get on Board!
- Foreclosure Resource Assistance Network
- Community Connections – Money Matters

The "Get on Board!" project was a game-centered effort to engage citizens in fiscal strategy and the influences and constrictions of budget decision making. The "Foreclosure Resource Assistance Network" was a county facilitated effort to connect various non-profit organizations and resources into a system to assist homeowners who faced foreclosure. The "Community Connections – Money Matters" project was a town hall style meeting, broadcast live over the county government channel and web, which answered questions from a live audience as well as TV and web viewers who sent emails or called in.

These three projects are part of Sarasota County's community building effort. The collective goals of these projects were to stimulate community interest, understanding, and citizen interaction to get feedback so we can concentrate our investment in modernizing the organization most effectively.
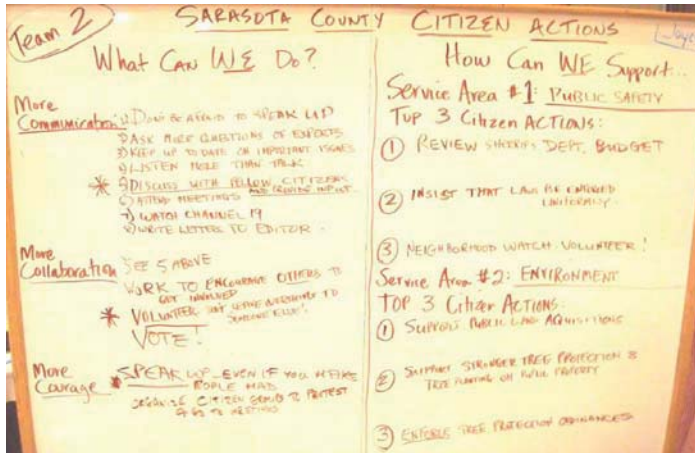
Investing in Community Interactions

GET ON BOARD

"Get on Board!" was a series of inventive, interactive, role-playing sessions that we hoped would show residents how their government balances multiple community priorities and allocates resources for those priorities. At the same time, Sarasota County wanted to know what's important to county residents, and encourage them to share in the decision-making process.

Sarasota County's goal was to engage citizens in a role-playing simulation game, one that would allow them to understand the county's financial responsibilities and limitations, as well as how it develops spending priorities for programs and services. The objective was to have residents come way with some ownership in the decision-making process. Everyone needs to find ways to remain involved, and bring their friends and families into community interactions after these sessions are done. In this community, we all share responsibility for the choices that are made.

Sarasota County pursued a creative idea to involve local citizens in upcoming budget discussions. At sites throughout Sarasota County in May 2008, the county hosted a series of three interactive workshops aimed at shaping public policy. Participants were asked to make real-life decisions based on very realistic exercises. Each exercise took place in a fictitious community, where events occur that require teams to make decisions based on spending and priorities. Choices were designed to stimulate collaboration and force debate and consensus, while recognizing the impact of advocates and special interests on community dialogues. The game was constructed so that there would never be a clearly perfect answer. No initiative would receive sufficient funds, creating the necessity for people to interact cooperatively. Game scoring took into account the decision-making process (the means), as well as the outcome (the ends). Points were given for courage, collaboration and consensus.

Web link: http://www.scgov.net/getonboard/

Investing in Community Interactions

FORECLOSURE RESOURCE ASSISTANCE NETWORK - FRAN

Every day Sarasota County hears from people who are facing foreclosure, overwhelmed by the ongoing economic crisis. The Sarasota County Commission feels challenged as well – challenged to provide resources and leadership that offer relief. There are no obvious or easy solutions to our community's economic slowdown and the unprecedented threat of foreclosures. An analysis of foreclosure data told a statistically dramatic story. About 8,000 lis pendens filings – those with a notice that a lawsuit has been filed concerning real estate – occurred between January and November 2008. Of these, 43% were on homesteaded properties, which is the primary residence of the household. This data suggests a new environment for all of us, and it thrusts county government into a new role – one that requires facilitating creative, community owned systemic solutions.

Sarasota County Commissioners created the Foreclosure Resource Assistance Network (FRAN) in October 2008 as an aggressive initiative to the rapidly developing foreclosure crisis. The community risks included increased crime, declining revenue, financial scams, dislocated families and schoolchildren, and neighborhood blight.

Evidence about the consequences of foreclosures began to soar in Sarasota County – newspaper headlines, television news reports, court filings, demands on social programs, and personal anecdotes. Multiple agencies were responding, but were handicapped by limited coordination and capacities. There was an abundance of information and advertisements on television, web pages, and in direct mail flyers, but much was misleading or of questionable value. The three driving goals for the FRAN program were developed to cut through this clutter:

- Stimulate personal responsibility for positive action.
- Promote fast, effective positive resolution for households in crisis.
- Enhance the community's capacity to address community needs.

It is important to note that the stated goals did not include preventing foreclosure. The goals focused on personal responsibility and a positive resolution of households in crisis. Metrics of success do not include households "saved" from foreclosure. Metrics tracked include: Some of the immediate measures of success include:

- Number of attendees at events
- Number of calls to 211, requesting information and assistance
- Number of hits to the FRAN web site
- Number of calls to the Sarasota County Call Center

A range of community organizations came together to focus on the stated goals. Working as community partners, they developed strategies to achieve these goals by identifying gaps in service delivery and re-directing resources to strengthen and enhance community capabilities. These strategies included:
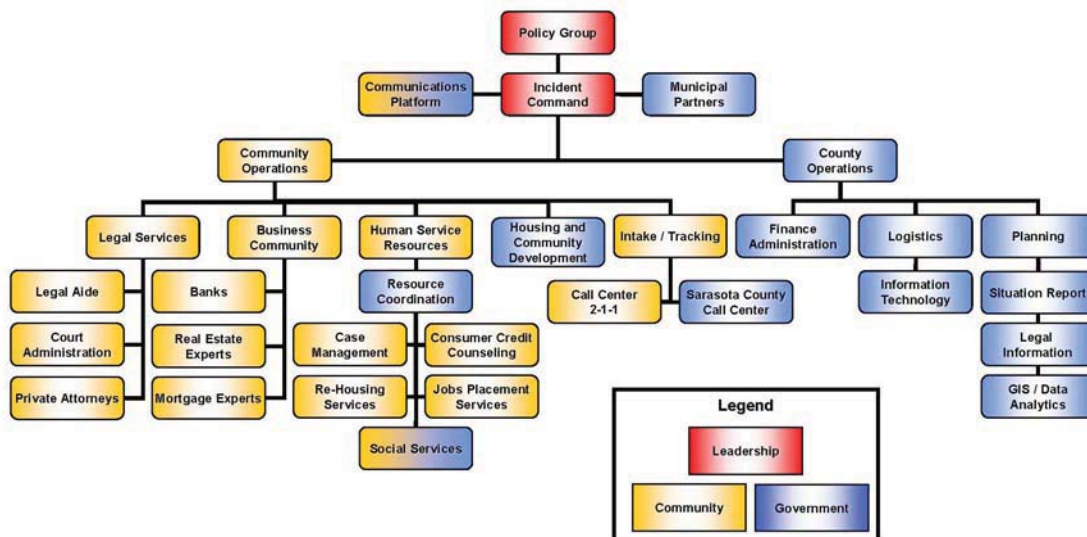
Investing in Community Interactions

- Providing accurate, credible information that is easily accessible.
- Making community support systems apparent.
- Providing a clear roadmap for what people can do.
- Building knowledge, skills and confidence of homeowners and enabling a call for action.

As the community assets gathered and aligned, a primary need emerged for collaborative efforts, supportive partnerships and clarified roles and responsibilities. The challenge was how to organize the program and the network. No magic model of interactivity existed. What did exist was a "stove-pipe like" community network of separate service delivery. The objective was to maximize the services delivered and to integrate separate services into a community system.

The county sought to facilitate discussions to integrate known community resources. An incident management system was explored with the organizational goal of tightly integrating and inter-connecting outcomes, organization, process and performance metrics. Sarasota County adapted a model much like that of the National Incident Management System (NIMS). NIMS is a broadly recognized model that is implemented in emergency or crisis situations, which is how the foreclosure issue has been viewed (economic crisis). The goal for using NIMS was to deliver clarity from chaos, foster communication and collaboration, eliminate duplication, and provide *united purpose*. The community, in fact, has been able to achieve these objectives through this organizational structure.

Among the many participating partners are: Catholic Charities, Jewish Family and Children's Services, The Salvation Army, Consumer Credit Counseling Services, Sarasota County Community Action Agency, Gulf Coast Legal Services, Legal Aid of Manasota, Sun Coast Partnership to End Homelessness, Senior Friendship Center, Community Foundation of Sarasota County, North Port Social Services, United Way, and Sarasota County government. These organizations came together, constructed a system for service delivery, identified roles and responsibilities, and delineated the gaps in the system. From more than 20 organizations working separately, *the community network crafted a unified system to achieve the community goals.*

Foreclosure Resource Assistance Network Organizational Chart

Investing in Community Interactions

The network was able to craft and agree to a collaborative plan that allocated new sources of money to fill gaps in service delivery. From a range of community and government resources, $1.7 million was dedicated to increase the capacity of the system and fill service gaps.

Numerous other community partners, including the chief judge in Sarasota County's Judicial District, stepped up. Judge Lee Haworth organized panel discussions about resources available and how to navigate through the foreclosure process. Participants included HUD credit counselors, human service providers and attorneys. Each of the panel discussions was video recorded, repeatedly televised on the government channel, and made available through DVDs and web-based online streaming video. In addition, the legal community is offering a series of foreclosure seminars at the local libraries and events where pro bono legal advice available to income-qualified individuals.

Sarasota County's community interaction has delivered a huge benefit by being more able to address the foreclosure challenge. The openness, understanding and willingness of concerned individuals and agencies to come together is unprecedented. From legal aid, to credit counseling, to human services, to county and city governments, to foundations, and the business community – Sarasota County has come together to collectively address one of the key economic crises affecting community. The community has learned that a large group of non-profits are ready and willing to respond and help people. The community learned that citizens value and trust the information presented by the consortium. The community recognized that older, established places could re-connect with original American values – values that establish the importance and commitment of both citizen and community.

Web link: http://www.scgov.net/HomeHelp/Default.asp

scgov

Investing in Community Interactions

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS – MONEY MATTERS

Sarasota County has established "Community Connections" as a moniker for distinct citizen engagement efforts over the past two years. Five different community conversations have occurred on the following topics: Money Matters (a budget conversation); Criminal Justice; Education; Health: and Libraries. The format of each connection varied based on the topic, the size of the group, and the issues to be discussed.

The "Community Connection – Money Matters" is unique in that it applied technology to an open town hall meeting, thereby allowing the largest number of citizens to listen and participate. "Money Matters" was a large scale engagement effort to seek feedback from the community, answer citizen questions, and provide an economic framework regarding Sarasota County's finances for the years to come. The discussion occurred live in studio and was broadcast on the local government channel and through the internet via streaming video. A panel that included the Chairman of the County Commission, County Administrator and Budget Director received questions from a professional moderator, from the live audience, and from the listening public through email and telephone. Also in the studio that evening were staff representatives from the agencies that provide county service, our libraries, parks and water departments.

Weeks prior to the live town hall meeting, an online survey was posted to seek citizen input on county programs and spending. The online survey asked citizens to identify what service level they wished to receive regarding multiple on-going county services. The challenge to the survey was the key financial decisions, which asked how to pay for the maintenance or expansion of any service levels. The simple choices presented were *increase property taxes and/or increase user fees*. But all of this was a precursor to the live town hall discussion.

Web link: http://www.scgov.net/CommunityConnections/default.asp

Investing in Community Interactions

SUMMARY

This case study presents the three most recent examples of planned community engagement and interaction – our community's *search for identity*. It is robust citizen participation that makes these efforts powerful and meaningful. The projects connect people with each other and with the future of our community. The return on investment in community interaction is not as tangible and cut and dry as our operational measures. However, the value proposition is simple – planned efforts to connect with the people helps citizens see the gap between what they want, the reality of limitations, and the means to close the gap.

PRESENTATION COMPONENTS

1. Innovation/Creativity
How did the program/project/service, etc. improve the organization?
- In each of the three projects, the voice of the customer is highlighted, the dual role of public servant is delineated, and citizens understand their ownership, in part or in full, of community decisions and actions.

Were new technologies use?
- Yes, new technologies were used in FRAN's web portal, and the citizen multi-voting at the Get on Board project. The Community Connections – Money Matters used an online survey form, and a simultaneous webcast, and live TV broadcast.

If yes, what methods and/or applications did you implement? Was a private consultant used?
- The "Get on Board" project used consultant Collaborative Labs at St. Petersburg College. Their involvement included the game design, meeting facilitation and electronic tabulations.

2. Citizen Outcomes
What customer/community needs and expectations were identified and fulfilled?
- In all of the projects, the community need was encouragement to speak and be heard. Citizen participative interaction allows for understanding, hopefully ownership, and a strong voice in the decision making of local government.

Did the initiative improve access to your government? If yes, how?
- All three of the projects included a range of communications efforts, all of which were organized on the SCGOV website. The links to each of the three projects are listed at the bottom of this page.

Has the health of the community improved as a result? If yes, how?
- One of the challenges for the return on investment in community interaction – the focus of these three projects – is to recognize the intangible assets of involved, committed citizens and community organizations to our collective future. Each of the three efforts instilled values of community, responsibility, commitment, assistance – while ensuring understanding of seemingly complex county budget matters.

3. Applicable Results and Real World Practicality
What practical applications could you share if selected?
- We could consider showing the "Get on Board" game as an interactive event.
- We could provide greater detail on how we framed up the use of National Incident Management System (NIMS).
- We could provide broader discussion of the use of the online survey tool as part of the Community Connections – Money Matters project.

Investing in Community Interactions

- How applicable is the project/program/service to other local governments?

What results/outcomes will you be able to share?

- A discussion of return on investment in community interaction

Please include any performance measures if applicable

- Sarasota County's Annual Citizen Survey, produced over the past five years, indicates increasing levels of citizen satisfaction, which can be interpreted as *trust* and *confidence* in local government.
- We have metrics of citizen participation in each of the projects, including citizen drafted recommendation, and citizen completed surveys.

4. Case Study Presentation

Briefly describe what your case study presentation might include.

- Power Point, program overview.
- Play the "Get on Board!" game.
- Provide templates and resources for a community system of incident management.
- Show film footage of actual events (Get on Board! and Money Matters).
- Discuss the pros and cons of live Town Hall Meetings.
- Demonstrate use of online survey.
- Discussing citizen feedback.