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COVER PAGE

Innovation Study Title It's tough to engage in suburbia: Rebuilding Citizen Engagement and Pride

Category Community Relationships

Jurisdiction Name Palm Beach County, City of Wellington

City/County Manager Paul Schofield

Population 57,703 for 2011

Submit Innovation Study for an Alliance Innovation Award Yes [XX] No []

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Rebuilding Citizen Engagement and Pride

Synopsis:

It's tough to engage in suburbia, especially with less funding and less resources. One of the unique features that make Wellington a Great Hometown is citizen engagement on all levels. Wellington is realigning existing resources, refocusing priorities and reinvesting in community to transform neighborhoods and inspire residents. Wellington has yielded rapid change in under two years: crime is down; code compliance is up; residents are active volunteers; landlords have joined forces; HOAs, local not-for-profits and faith-based organizations are ready partners.

In down economy, Wellington built City Hall, renovated its Aquatic Complex, added an Amphitheater, built a barrier-free playground and improved the City's main boulevard. The City spent more than \$50 million in capital projects and created Town Center, anchored by a LEED Certified 54,000 square foot City Hall – a one stop shop for customer service; all in an effort to create a work-play public area utilizing vacant space. Residents are now able to enjoy family time and come to one central location for their business with the City.

By stabilizing neighborhoods and attracting businesses that generate family-sustaining employment, Wellington is securing its tax base, taking the City from bust to boom. The savings have allowed the city to maintain its high standard for resident's services and will continue funding capital projects during the 2012 Fiscal Year, including a new Community Center and Boys & Girls Club facility.

Wellington's Community Relationships initiative was first developed in an effort to stabilize neighborhoods and to prevent, reverse and diminish the impact of the foreclosure crisis in multifamily neighborhoods. Our goal has been to define a formula for best practices, getting the results communities need without a hefty price tag. In an essence, we are "making more with less" with a model that can be replicated in other municipalities throughout the United States.

Our Community Relations formula involves a combination of cultivating an active volunteer base, soliciting business and civic partnerships and working directly with residents to make a difference by providing them with a transparent government.

The Volunteer Wellington program began through a partnership with a resident volunteer group known as the Citizens Volunteer Organization (CVO). The residents who participate in Volunteer Wellington assist throughout Wellington. CVO utilizes volunteers to enhance community engagement and the delivery of services to residents. The program allows the City to efficiently conserve resources while providing volunteers personal satisfaction and an increased understanding of City government. CVO partners with local schools, providing meals to families in need, and assists residents with home improvements that reduce code violations.

In addition Volunteers are assisting on many levels including with various sports programs within our Parks & Recreation division as assistant coaches and coaches. Many of Wellington's Seniors programming is run by volunteers. Volunteers and individuals donate their time not only with helping with programming, working with staff, but with assisting families who are experiencing downfalls in an bad economic climate. For example, our High School Summer Service program encouraged students to volunteer with various departments throughout Wellington during their summer vacation. Each student logged up to 75 community service hours and developed a better understanding of how their government works.

Wellington has also focused on building community partnerships with various businesses and civic organizations. Staff has been successful in soliciting businesses for in-kind donations, such as getting a local restaurant to provide free food and drinks at a community clean-up events. These partnerships are mutually beneficial, rewarding residents for their participation in City events while also providing businesses with marketing potential. We have achieved local business participation in events ranging from toy drives and food drives to Halloween events, neighborhood meetings and landlord events. Our civic partnerships, such as working with housing nonprofits, the Solid Waste Authority, Boys & Girls Club schools and local chambers of commerce have also broadened our community participation. In the current fiscal year, we have already raised more than \$27,000 simply by soliciting businesses and organizations.

By focusing on foreclosure prevention and neighborhood stabilization, Wellington is securing its tax base while also protecting property values. The best example of this is our White Pine neighborhood, the first neighborhood we targeted in 2009. Early intervention prevented a decline in property values – an anomaly in Florida and the nation’s foreclosure crisis. Wellington opened its Homeownership Center in March 2011 by obtaining donated space in a shopping center. Housing Partnership, Inc., a local non-profit, staffs the center and provides residents with foreclosure prevention and first time homebuyer services, including referrals to other organizations. Our Homeownership Center is also working with residents and nonresidents alike in the sale of five homes Wellington purchased and renovated through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s Neighborhood Stabilization Program (NSP). Wellington also hosts monthly foreclosure prevention workshops to better reach our residents.

Landlord 411 – Wellington’s partnership with the Florida Landlord Network entitles our landlords to free membership, workshops and tenant screening for approximately \$28. This includes a national criminal background check, previous history, eviction history and credit check. Pro bono attorneys are currently developing a standardized lease agreement and prequalification standards to further assist our landlords. Working relationships have been developed with law enforcement with 16 evictions currently in process. Additionally, a database has been created with more than 120 members corresponding via email. This database includes a list of reliable service providers, available units for rent, crime alerts and meeting suggestions.

Wellington has surpassed our initial expectations of these programs. Between 2007 and 2010, the city experienced a 40 percent reduction in crime in our targeted neighborhoods; code violations have decreased; participation in neighborhood meetings has increased, and in its first year, Volunteer Wellington participants have logged more than 3,000 community service hours, saving the City \$30,000 in staff costs. The cost of starting and continuing these programs has been minimal and offset through donations. Wellington repurposed existing facilities to relocate key personnel near the areas they are serving. Our costs consist of reallocated staff costs and printing expenses to create materials for our residents.

Transparency - Wellington has enhanced service delivery through its community relations efforts. Wellington initiated the Open Wellington project as a multi-phased project that incorporates financial reporting, document management/document retrieval and interactive GIS.

The online application is accessed through a link on the website and users can browse data through various information types. Economic benefits include cost avoidance, reduced staff hours, and improved customer service which are all part of the proactive approach to complying with current and future legislation. The City’s technology investment demonstrates the commitment to providing solutions that benefit residents and employees. Recognizing there would be several challenges to achieve financial transparency in a secure environment while allowing the public to access daily financial data; Wellington implemented a protected solution that enabled the goal of true transparency without compromising data integrity and security.

Wellington is proud to be recognized as the first known municipality in the nation to provide “real-time” financial data to the public. As a result of this innovative project, Wellington continues the effort toward transparency and has implemented the Citizen’s Action Center an online tool that allows residents to create personal accounts and communicate with staff on the City’s website, in reference to code violations, potholes and other issues without having to rely on email. The Citizens Action Center is divided into four categories: Find Answers, Make Requests, Ask Questions and My Support Center.

Continuing with transparency, Wellington is using GIS technology to gauge the results and determine neighborhood trends. Wellington is currently able to map the following information:

- Crime statistics provided by the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office
- Code violations provided by our Code Officers
- Property values pulled directly from the Palm Beach County Appraiser's Office
- Foreclosures tracked by Core Logic, a program we have subscribed to
- Owner occupancy rates tracked by our utilities and crosschecked with the Property Appraiser's homestead exemptions
- Rental Licenses tracked through our HTE system
- Short and long term infrastructure needs determined by a FICA survey

Our data-driven approach has allowed us to focus on the areas of highest need tailored for each block and neighborhood. Wellington has not used a consultant to develop our community relations programs.

Wellington is cleaning up existing crime and preventing future crime by focusing on youth outreach, attracting community partners and teaming our Deputies with Code Officers. As a result, between 2007 and 2010, our targeted neighborhoods experienced a 40 percent reduction in crime.

The primary goals of Wellington's Code Officers are to ensure our neighborhoods are safe and visually attractive. In addition to traditional code activities, through our community meetings and resident feedback, neighborhoods are selected for code sweeps. Code Officers conduct an initial inspection and issue courtesy letters to our residents explaining any violations. Then, we send our Code Officers into the neighborhoods along with our Neighborhood Advocates to host a Community Improvement Day. At these events, Wellington provides the resources residents need to correct violations, such as pressure cleaners to clean houses and driveways. Residents also band together to assist their neighbors in correcting violations. Typically, 60 percent of code violations are corrected with the assistance of the Community Improvement Days.

Residents who may have once felt intimidated or jaded by government are now some of our most active participants. By engaging residents, we have improved their access to voice opinions and access services. We are reaching residents through neighborhood meetings, assistance in starting neighborhood watch groups, neighborhood cleanup events and free community events such as movie nights and basketball tournaments. Our neighborhood meetings are the main forums allowing us to gauge the opinions of our residents. For instance, staff has proposed road closures back to the community, and opinions were measured through surveys completed at meetings and also posted on our City website for residents who were unable to attend. Staff has also created movie previews and a monthly 30 minute entertainment-style show that we play on the local channel and before our free movies to educate residents about City services, programs and upcoming events. As a result, our neighborhood health and community pride has improved with the evictions of undesirable tenants, crime reduction, nuisance abatement and Community Improvement Days to correct code violations.

Wellington's model for best practices can easily be tailored and applied to other municipalities throughout the nation. We can share the practical applications as well as our results in the following topics:

- How to engage residents, change attitudes and boost community pride
- Soliciting business and civic partnerships to bring neighborhoods from bust to boom
- Creating a landlord association
- Building a robust volunteer base to save money at your municipality
- Measuring neighborhoods to develop goals and techniques for improvement
- Busting out of the bubble to improve your city and region
- Rooting out neighborhood crime with Neighborhood Advocates

- Create and encourage governmental transparency
- How GIS can contribute to the present and the future – deliver statistics

Wellington utilizes Success Measures, a non-profit subsidiary of Neighborworks America, to generate surveys and track performance measures, including sense of community, business and community support, resident satisfaction, property values, neighborhood security, duration of residency, visual attraction and owner occupancy rates. Our first three indicators are measured through surveys and other qualitative data. Our results are detailed in neighborhood reports highlighting community issues, strategies, process, outcomes and indicators as well as completed projects, current projects and items of note.

To encourage other local government leaders to engage their residents, it is essential for any presenter to engage their audience. Wellington can accomplish this by following an interactive, Socratic Seminar format to encourage the attendees to think for themselves and discuss their particular community issues. Handout materials would also drive home the discussion point and would provide the attendees with ideas they could bring home to their city.