

The Role of the Cultural Arts in Post-Disaster Recovery

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Background

Post disaster recovery often takes a bricks-and-mortar economic development approach. Community engagement is considered an afterthought, as decision makers strive to put the community infrastructure back in order as quickly as possible. An asset-based community development (ABCD) approach focuses on how public and private sectors become involved in improving their economic, environmental and social condition and use local assets in this process (Green and Haines, 2015). This “whole community approach” in disaster management is now being promoted (Busch and Givens, 2013, FEMA 2011, Spranger, 2014). An often forgotten community asset is its cultural resources that can be utilized in post-disaster efforts (Kruger, 2015). This paper will discuss how an ABCD approach and cultural arts focus was used to address post-disaster recovery in a small rural community and had positive outcomes in economic revitalization and citizen engagement.

Live Oak, Florida and Tropical Storm Debby

Located in northern Florida, Live Oak is the county seat of Suwannee Florida, with a population near 7,000. It is a typical rural Florida community that once flourished as a railroad town rich in natural resources. In the last several decades, it has been in economic decline. Due to the topography of the land, the downtown area sits in what amounts to a geological bowl where water readily accumulates. Periodic flooding occurred in the past, but locals saw this as a natural occurrence.

On June 26, 2012, tropical storm Debby stalled over Live Oak. Within a 24 hour period, 80 percent of the town flooded with waters in the downtown area reaching 7 feet. More than 30 sinkholes formed throughout the city, including a large sink hole 180 feet deep in the downtown area between the courthouse and several historic buildings. An estimated 350 homes were flooded. Families were displaced. More than \$5 million dollars in damages were incurred; a devastating financial impact to the struggling rural community.

The Governor declared Live Oak a disaster area. Federal and state funds and assistance provided technical solutions. Yet the community still seemed adrift. Mr. Keith Mixon, councilman, wondered if this event might be used to look at new approaches in the post-disaster recovery efforts. Other than the technical fix that the federal and state government provided, what other resources might be utilized to help the community? He was particularly interested in how the downtown area could be revitalized.

A New Approach

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Mr. Mixon contacted the University of Florida's county extension office, based in Live Oak for assistance. The extension office is part of the nation's land grant college system, a unique federal-state-county partnership in the United State that has provided research, teaching and extension (community outreach) programs for more than 100 years. There is at least one designated land grant college in each of the U.S. fifty states, and an extension office in every county in the United States. Staff provide technical assistance and research-based educational programs to address local issues. These programs are associated with rural areas to address agriculture production, family and youth issues. However, Extension has a rich history in community engagement activities (Franz, 2014), and involving the cultural arts in outreach activities (Peters, 2006).

Following Mr. Mixon's inquiry, the county extension director (CED) contacted community development specialists, based on the University of Florida campus. An initial scoping session was held with elected officials, city staff and members of the business community. This was followed up by review of various reports and calls with elected officials. In November, a community visioning session was held, attended by government and business leaders and interested public.

At this meeting, the specialists provided a good news/bad news message. The bad news was that they stated they did not have the answers nor solutions to their problems. The good news was that the solutions to the problems rested with those attending and others in the community. Also, other communities had resolved similar problems, following an ABCD approach. The specialists then led a brain-storming session on what residents wanted Live Oak to look like in one year, five years and 20 years. One area of interest that many had was on how they might better utilize the natural and cultural resources of the community. They also wanted to know what other communities were doing in revitalization efforts.

The Bus Tour

From this feedback, the specialists coordinated a bus tour to Community Redevelopment Agencies (CRA) in the surrounding areas to see how they were using their funds for revitalization efforts. The regional transit company donated buses for the event. The specialists utilized their contacts with CRAs in the communities of Gainesville, High Springs and Alachua for field stops. Under Florida Law (Chapter 163, Part III) local governments can create special districts to reduce blighted areas and improve economic conditions. The most common tool for this redevelopment is through tax increment financing, in which local taxes are frozen in these areas. Any future increase in property values due to redevelopment efforts are then set aside to be used to support revitalization projects within that district.

Examples of CRA traditional projects include: building renovations, new building construction, flood control initiatives, water and sewer improvements, parking lots, neighborhood parks, roadway improvements, sidewalks, street tree plantings and redevelopment incentives such as grants and loans for façade improvements, sprinkler system upgrades, signs, and structural improvements.

The bus tour was a critical juncture in looking at new approaches for Live Oak. There was a surprising turnout of more than 30 prominent members of the public and private sector, including artists and individuals interested in the local heritage. Two city commissioners and one county commissioner

attended this event. During the bus tour, elected officials saw they could do things a different way and utilize their CRA funds to include the cultural arts in revitalization efforts.

The bus tour was an important step in strengthening the social capital in Live Oak. Social capital can be viewed as social networks that rely on reciprocity, trust and cooperation. These social relationships are important in mobilizing communities to successful outcomes, particularly in economic development activities. There are several types of social capital. Bonding capital are relationships with friends and family. Bridging capital are relationships with heterogeneous groups - people one normally does not associate with on a day-to-day basis (Putnam, 2001). Linking capital is the relationship between a person and a government official or elected leader. Some indicate that this linking capital is an important component in major post-disaster recovery efforts (Aldrich, 2012). The individuals on the bus tour strengthened their bridging capital and linking capital during their time together. Each also learned that they could be involved in new ways that had had not previously been considered.

Role of the Cultural Arts

In the Spring, 2013, the specialists saw an opportunity for Live Oak to apply for a grant funded by the National Endowment of the Arts, working through the Citizens Institute on Rural Design (CIRD) <http://rural-design.org/> CIRD provides funds and technical assistance for rural communities. Working with the CED, the community put an application together. Their CIRD application was selected from a national pool of 31 applicants. The CED worked closely with the CIRD staff and community leaders over the next several months to coordinate a community workshop. She also secured a major grant from the National Association of Realtors to help in these efforts.

In the fall of 2013, a community workshop was held in the historic train depot that brought together local leaders from non-profits, community organizations, and government to discuss and identify solutions to the community's problems. Four national experts provided presentations on community marketing brand, an examination of the connectivity and walkability within the community, discussions on new business development and the role of the cultural arts. Speakers included James Rojas, founder of Place It!; Ed Barlow, Vice President of NorthStar Destination Strategies; Rick Hall, President of Hall Planning & Engineering Inc.; and Kennedy Smith, co-founder of the Community Land Use and Economics Group.

Active in this workshop were local artists who brought their ideas of the cultural arts into the discussion. The workshop also took an interactive approach where participants created their own models for their ideal community of Live Oak, worked with the local artists to sketch logos for the town, and considered pedestrian and cyclist street improvement on a walking tour. Food and social activities were prominent as ways to bring this active group closer together.

Participants stated that the most valuable part of the workshop was "learning about successful strategies used in other small towns through discussions with the speakers," while also "learning of local resources that will help make Live Oak what it wants to be." A short video was created by a small business owner that demonstrated the energy and enthusiasm generated at this meeting.²

² The video can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=phwaD6nVdfs

The workshop closed on Saturday with a community-wide event at Heritage Park where the work that had been done over the course of two days was unveiled. Newly designed logos and model city examples created during the workshop were shared with community members who attended this event.

Outcomes and Next Steps

Using an ABCD approach, Live Oak residents are beginning to see the city as a glass full of potential and promises rather than a glass empty with pessimism and no hope for the future. Extension faculty continue to bring resources and expertise to help build local community capacity in downtown redevelopment.

Results over the past several years:

1. Elected officials and city staff increased their knowledge and skills in utilizing CRA funds in restoration activities. New projects funded include The Rails to Trails Project and The West Side Retail Area Project. The Live Oak Heritage Trail, which connects the downtown with Heritage Park and Gardens is now complete, with sidewalks that connect it to the downtown.
2. The community coordinated with Small Business Development Center at University of North Florida to hire a business consultant and place him within the Live Oak Chamber of Commerce.
3. Downtown buildings damaged by the floods were demolished. This area, the site of the 180 foot new sinkhole, has been filled with new grass and trees. It is now designated as “Festival Park,” where cultural events, such as the annual Jazz and Arts Blues Festival, farmers’ market, and other community activities are being held.
4. Citizens have the opportunity to be more engaged in local decisions and attending community meetings. Public meeting notices are routinely sent via email to concerned citizens who have been involved in these restoration activities.

The community redevelopment efforts remain a work in progress. But the community is on a much more positive direction with renewed commitment, and people in the community are recognizing that they are the ones that can move Live Oak forward. The disaster provided an incentive to take a new approach.

Elected officials stated the University of Florida Extension faculty helped move the community forward and provided the community with new direction and purpose. Live Oak had significant funds and technical assistance from federal and state agencies to deal with the aftermath of the flood, but the CED and specialists helped bring the community together (Schweers, 2013).

The bottom line is that members in the community now recognize that they can make a difference in their community and are taking action to become engaged and active. They are building on their rich history and talents and realizing that the cultural arts can be a vital part of their community and their future.

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