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The Blind Men and the Elephant: Learning a Little at a Time About Civic Engagement

Melanie Moore Kubo, Ph.D., and Ashley McKenna, M.S., *See Change, Inc.*

Key Points

- This article, written from the perspective of the evaluator, describes what happened in one community in which four noncollaborating funders were supporting community development programs.
- The Treeline Collaborative evolved from grassroots origins to become a leading organization in the community, serving as a one-stop shop for many programs and providing a structure for civic engagement of residents.
- A collaborative evaluation would have enabled a deeper understanding of the Treeline Collaborative, the outcomes it attained and missed, and the multiple roles it plays in the community, perhaps leading to more effective program and funding decisions.

Though each was partly in the right and all were in the wrong.

—John Godfrey Saxe (1816–1887)

Introduction

A well-known fable, originating thousands of years ago in India, describes what happens when a group of blind men encounter an elephant, each touching a different part of the animal to determine what it is. The one who feels the leg claims that an elephant is like a tree trunk. The one who feels the trunk insists that an elephant is like a snake. The one who feels the ear is convinced that an elephant is really like a fan and so on. Argu-

ments ensue, with each individual becoming more entrenched in his opinion.

It's easy to grasp the point of the parable: don't limit yourself to your own perspective, because it's probably incomplete. But it is perhaps much harder to live by its message in our personal or professional lives, as the sheer complexity of the world around us makes understanding more than our small "part" of the larger system daunting, if not impossible. A certain amount of egotism is inherent in our human nature simply because we make sense of the world from behind our own eyes, sighted or not. Most traditional paths to "enlightenment" encourage travelers to expand their viewpoint.

This article describes a situation in one community that may contain a lesson in viewpoint expansion for many others. The "elephant" here in question is civic engagement, and the "blind men" are the very stakeholders — some funders and some nonprofit practitioners — who were trying to create it. The grasp that each stakeholder has on civic engagement in this small community was produced through evaluation — but evaluation only of *their* contribution to a community-wide change process. Just as in the parable, the "big picture" of how these contributions fit together might have been missed were it not for the fact that — largely by coincidence — the same researcher was hired four separate times to examine the elephant.

The decision to share the results of an evaluation almost always rests with the organization that commissioned it, in many cases a foundation. Most commonly, a few key stakeholders in an evaluated project will read an evaluation report, and a shared belief often exists that few outside a small circle would ever be interested in the findings. The implicit practice of not sharing evaluation findings prevents this belief from being challenged. It's as if those touching the elephant kept their conclusions to themselves, never comparing notes with their fellow examiners.

There is no clear onus on an independent evaluation firm to synthesize related findings from different projects, even if such a synthesis might help everyone involved in an initiative or a community do better work. In fact, because the funding entity technically "owns" the findings, it may not even be a judgment call an evaluation firm gets to make. But in this case, we feel compelled to tell the story of the Treeline Collaborative, as it offers valuable lessons for all of us involved in place-based initiatives, civic engagement and community change efforts, and evaluation.

The Treeline Collaborative

Staff of See Change, Inc., were first brought in to evaluate a project in Treeline, California, in 2004. But by that time, community-building and community change work had been going on for six years or more.

Treeline is one of the most impoverished and under-resourced neighborhoods in the San Francisco Bay Area. Once a suburban bedroom community, Treeline has become more of a thoroughfare as the urban areas around it have grown toward each other. Businesses have left the area in recent years, and housing values have declined. The community is densely populated and has experienced a major demographic shift in the past 20 years, becoming a hub for new immigrants. Over half of Treeline's residents now are Latino; many speak little to no English. Recent immigrants have joined an existing population of aging, mostly white residents. One local business owner commented, "In the early 1990s, you could tell Treeline was becoming a 'hot spot.'"

In 1998, in response to concerns about shifting populations and opportunities in Treeline, the county conducted a formal needs assessment. From the outset of this effort, there was a desire by the county to involve local residents in decision making about their community. At the first convening, over 100 stakeholders came together to identify needs and barriers. Residents called for a community center and more access to a variety of services. Out of this process, the Treeline Collaborative (TC) was created to develop and launch a one-stop community center.

There is no clear onus on an independent evaluation firm to synthesize related findings from different projects, even if such a synthesis might help everyone involved in an initiative or a community do better work. In fact, because the funding entity technically "owns" the findings, it may not even be a judgment call an evaluation firm gets to make.

A one-stop center now exists, but TC is much more than a colocated service delivery model. From the outset, resident engagement in the planning and delivery of needed services was a priority, and over the years TC has evolved into a robust civic engagement mechanism, relied on by city and county officials for input and dissemination of information and resources. For its part, TC has not settled for an input-only role in civic governance; they have developed the capacity to obtain independent funding for initiatives ranging from microenterprise development to health education to a local shuttle service for senior citizens. Additionally, TC actively advocates for and works with city government to plan neigh-

borhood improvements, such as traffic calming measures and walking pathways. The city welcomes the involvement, and true partnerships have developed between the city manager's office and the resident leadership of TC. On the surface of it, Treeline's story is a civic engagement fairy tale.

But of course what happened in Treeline is not imaginary, simple, or 100 percent positive. Conducting fieldwork and data collection ranging from survey administration to ethnographic observation to videography for the past five years in Treeline has revealed the reality, complexity, and vulnerabilities of the work. Even though none of See Change's evaluation projects in Treeline were designed to address specific research questions about civic engagement, we have ended up with a body of knowledge about the catalysts, mechanisms, and maintenance of such work.

Evolving the Elephant

The seeds of civic engagement and TC were present before the 1998 convening in Treeline — as they are in most any community — in the form of small groups of residents working to improve schools or clean up streets. Fragmented activities were occurring in the community, but there were no structures or processes in place to frame them. When TC formed, it offered a structure, but no coherent process for engaging residents. At first, only a handful of community residents were involved in TC; the rest of the active members were service providers, funders, or local government representatives.

Neighborhood Action Teams

A major turning point in Treeline's civic engagement story was TC's decision to hire a local nonprofit organization, TOGETHER, to provide leadership development, grassroots organizing, and project-planning skills to local residents. Small groups, called neighborhood action teams (NATs), were formed from among community residents already labeled as leaders by their peers, and these individuals were provided with in-depth training over many months. As months became years, the members of the NATs with more experience recruited and then trained new

members, creating an effective replication cycle. Some of these experienced leaders spun off their own NATs in other neighborhoods, and many of the original NAT leaders began participating actively and formally with TC.

Major Investment

The second major turning point for civic engagement in Treeline was the infusion of major funding from a variety of sources, starting with two local health care funders and one statewide foundation focused on public health. A key goal of this funding initiative was to create a lasting infrastructure for community wellness.

The funding infused energy, capacity, and needed resources into what had been a largely volunteer, community-driven effort. A broader vision was defined, residents from across the entire community participated in planning processes that revealed their shared values, and specific task forces were created in the areas of health, housing, economic development, and education.

Social Entrepreneurs Emerge

The loose structure of TC and the grassroots nature of its core membership base created ideal conditions for the emergence of unique solutions to Treeline's pressing social issues. The years from 2001 to 2004 represented the next phase of Treeline's maturing civic engagement phenomenon, with a series of dynamic, community-led innovations taking root, including the following:

- Women from one of the NATs founded a healthy Mexican-food catering business.
- The NATs intervened in an ongoing issue between local merchants and day laborers who waited for jobs on the corner outside their stores. NAT members conducted an informal needs assessment with the men and, in so doing, engaged them in conversations about what they would like to see in the community and what their own goals were for the future. They also engaged the local merchants in developing a solution to the perceived problem. The conversations and relationships that ensued led to the transformation of an underutilized day labor center into an economic development

center called Treeline Futures. Men wait inside the center for work and, while waiting, can participate in a variety of activities, including English as a Second Language courses, carpentry training, or recreational activities like chess or soccer.

- Based on demand from NAT members, a new group, a financial action team, convened and received training in financial literacy, including investing and real estate issues. The group pooled their resources and invested in and rehabilitated a house (with help from Treeline Futures laborers). When the house was sold, the profits were distributed among the investors, who opted to create a small donor-advised fund for the community at a local community foundation. One investor said, “Before this house, I didn’t have anything to give back to my community besides my time. Now, it’s going to be cash!”

These social entrepreneurial activities took place outside the formal structure of TC, and, in spirit, they echo the types of “micro” civic engagement activities (i.e., participating in school groups) that these NAT members may have been fostering prior to any formal initiative. The shift that occurred in Treeline was that these new projects were much more complex and ambitious in scope, requiring the coordination and buy-in of diverse and sometimes opposed stakeholders. Their success built the confidence of NAT members to an all-time high: there seemed to be nothing they couldn’t do if they set their minds to it.

Recognition

In 2003, Treeline was the recipient of an annual leadership award given by a local community foundation to a neighborhood demonstrating high levels of civic unity. Twelve individuals were named specifically as awardees. Almost all of them were somehow connected to TC; four of them were NAT members. The five-year award required the group to work together to allocate an annual grant to the community; in addition, each individual received a monetary award and access to further technical assistance and professional development.

Strong Local Leadership — for Better and Worse

Although service providers and funders were members of the TC, the body developed a flavor of resident leadership as more and more residents became involved. This trend solidified in 2006 with the hiring of two individuals who had participated in the early formation of TC into formal leadership positions: the executive directorship and the role of business manager. They were two of the strongest advocates for community voice at the city and county decision-making tables. And although both brought a range of professional skills and experiences to the positions, both were also learning on the job. Both women had been in prominent community roles — Carol, the business manager, had been a NAT facilitator, and Janice, the executive director, had provided early coaching and consulting to members of TC and had been instrumental in the development of Treeline Futures.

Although service providers and funders were members of the TC, the body developed a flavor of resident leadership as more and more residents became involved.

Under Janice’s leadership, TC made important strides forward. She led key stakeholders through a re-visioning process and also revitalized the task forces. She revamped TC’s website and introduced the idea of strategy and evaluation to TC. She also secured additional major funding, including a million-dollar grant from the state for an early childhood and parenting center and a multiyear grant from a health care foundation to launch a comprehensive campaign for healthy eating and active living in Treeline. At the same time, both she and Carol were very active advocates for extensive and authentic community input to an “urban redesign” process that was unfolding at the city level.

During her tenure as executive director, Janice raised a significant amount of resources for TC through project-specific grants. While all these projects were related to TC's overall goal of building a healthier community, the implementation of the projects often fell to staff or volunteers who did not have Janice's same sense of the "big picture." To complicate matters, Janice decided to also become the executive director of Treeline Futures, creating an endlessly demanding workload and dual role for herself. To complicate matters further, a freak incident landed Janice in and out of the hospital for the better part of a year. She valiantly continued to lead the organizations over the telephone, but without a broad internalization by multiple stakeholders of Janice's vision for TC, the various strands of work became more splintered than integrated. Carol's role was business manager, but of necessity she took on many other operational and leadership functions for TC, adding to her own impossible workload.

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During this time, Janice drastically reduced the budget for TOGETHER, the nonprofit leadership development organization that had so carefully built the NATs over the years. The director of this organization — herself a central figure in Treeline and a longtime friend of Janice's — was shocked and offended at the manner in which the decision was made to essentially fire them. Janice's action created political rifts within TC that had not been present before. The role and prominence of the NATs began to recede. One key NAT advocate goes further, saying that the NATs have been

"gutted" in the past two years. "Action teams" continue to exist as subcommittees of TC, but increasingly they have a topical focus, such as the "health and safety action team," rather than a neighborhood-based focus.

Ultimately, Janice decided to resign the executive director role at TC in favor of being the full-time executive director at Treeline Futures. Janice was replaced as executive director of TC by a former consultant with project management and evaluation experience although no prior experience in Treeline. His tenure as executive director was less than one year; he did not share Janice's vision and was not successful at raising additional funds to support TC's ongoing work. He also eliminated a key staff position of "community liaison," staffed by a former housekeeper who had become a pivotal NAT leader, and took the community liaison role on himself despite his limited experience and credibility among residents. TC is currently conducting a search for a replacement, and three board members are sharing the daily responsibilities of running the organization.

Carol remains on staff and continues to be a strong link to the NAT history and structure. The main theme of TC's work now is influencing urban planning through participation in various urban design initiatives under way at the city level. Residents are still engaged in TC through a newly designed structure of "community listeners," or trained individuals who outreach with other residents to gather community input on various issues.

Treeline Futures also grew dramatically under Janice's direction, with new funding and expanded programming. The county became very interested in Treeline Futures' creation of a worker-owned cooperative housecleaning business that would feature environmentally sound "green cleaning," and they made a planning grant to develop this program, to be developed and run by women working as housecleaners outside the mainstream economy. But challenges during the planning phase led the county to not support an implementation of the worker co-op. Shortly after this decision, Janice resigned as executive director of Treeline Futures.

So What Is It?

TC has always been somewhat difficult to define in traditional terms. To some, it is a community center where residents can access services ranging from low-cost health insurance to parenting classes to substance abuse intervention. To others, it is an alliance of concerned, highly engaged and creative residents working as volunteers to make their community a better place. On the one hand, TC has a formal structure: it is a 501c3 with a board, executive director, steering committee, and staff. On the other hand, it has many informal “owners” who exert a powerful moral authority as they insist on the deliberate and thorough inclusion of everyday, resident leaders in decision making having to do with TC and the Treeline community in general. The formal sometimes struggles with the informal.

TC is more than the sum of these parts. TC has a strong track record and high credibility within the community, powerful community-building expertise, and a well-developed infrastructure for funding, service delivery and referral, and convening. It is a renewable resource for the Treeline community — a potential home and source of energy for new projects and a hub that links existing projects together, whether they are initiated by a funding partnership, local government, service provider, NAT, or resident at large.

TC is also a vulnerable resource, subject to the negative dynamics that can plague any organization: overwork and burnout of staff, internal politics, inconsistent leadership, and, as with many nonprofit organizations, the mission drift that can accompany project-specific funding. It is certain that TC is a civic engagement success story, but it is equally certain that TC’s story is not over yet.

A Leg, a Belly, a Trunk, and a Tail: Seeing Four Parts of Civic Engagement

The story laid out here is only one version of the past 10 years of civic engagement work in Treeline. No doubt there are other versions that are more comprehensive. But there are perhaps only a handful of people who could tell any detailed account of all the strands of work in Treeline, and it is unlikely that any of them represent one of

the organizations that have funded TC, with the possible exception of the county. It is probably an even smaller handful of people who have spent time reflecting on the lessons about civic engagement and community change available in the Treeline story.

This lack of awareness and reflection has consequences on many levels. The consequence for the field of civic engagement is to miss an opportunity for learning that might inform future efforts. The consequence for the public and private philanthropies that have or will support TC is to risk inefficient, off-target, or even harmful funding strategies. The consequence for TC is its potential failure to achieve its core mission of fostering and responding to resident civic engagement.

TC’s present formal and informal infrastructure was created through a unique process involving best practices in resident civic engagement, key leaders, creativity, and *chutzpah*. But without a clear understanding of *how* TC reached this place, the principles and practices that guided its evolution will not be available guides for the current generation of TC’s leadership. It is not too far-fetched to imagine TC shifting more toward a service delivery model — the simple one-stop shop it was first envisioned to be. There is some evidence that this shift is already taking place, but nowhere is there a “dashboard” on which a red light is flickering as these data come in to the system.

Evaluation in Treeline

See Change is not the only organization to evaluate initiatives launched in Treeline over the past 10 years, but it is probably the organization that has done so most frequently and over the longest duration of time. Beginning with a theory-of-change development project in 2004, we have conducted evaluation research for TOGETHER, the Community Foundation’s Leadership Awards Program, TC, and Treeline Futures. Each research project has been discrete, with different clients, contact people, audiences, goals, and dissemination plans. Outside this article, there is currently no forum or medium in which the findings from each study will be brought together. Yet we believe that the cumulative learning that we —

as the evaluators — have done over the years in Treeline is more important to distill and communicate with the field than the individual results of any one evaluation project.

There are so many different resident-driven initiatives going on in Treeline that it is hard to determine where TC's involvement begins and ends. TC has done a very effective job of integrating the leaders of various resident projects — such as a youth soccer league involving over 800 youth in regular physical activity or efforts to build community gardens at local schools — into the daily life of TC. As a result, it is difficult to trace a funder's dollar through the web of interrelated initiatives. We can comment best on the investments made in Treeline that we evaluated; table 1 illustrates the strategies, expected outcomes, and results of these four investments.

The four studies that we've conducted or are in the process of conducting have produced the following tools and findings:

- *A theory of change for the NAT model:* The first Healthcare Foundation, along with other funders, provided support for TC to contract with TOGETHER to build and maintain the NATs in Treeline. A program officer at the Community Foundation who followed the work for a number of years wanted to document what was happening, though he knew that many of the changes in Treeline were intangible and might not lend themselves to measurement. We worked with TOGETHER, Foundation staff, Janice, NAT facilitators, and other key stakeholders to develop a theory of change (figure 1) and then a short documentary film that used the theory of change as its storyboard.

Though this project had the smallest scope and budget of the four evaluations, it has been, in our estimation, the most valuable research conducted in Treeline. The theory of change explains not only the work of TOGETHER but also the underlying structures and process through which civic engagement led to community change in Treeline.

- *An examination of the Leadership Awards Program:* The same Community Foundation that encouraged TOGETHER's work on the NATs also offers the Leadership Awards Program under a different arm of the organization. See Change was asked to develop an evaluation of the Awards Program overall. Compared to the other communities we studied, the implementation of the Awards Program in Treeline was more difficult, and the effects appear more muted. This finding may be explained by the fact that the Awards Program was a community-building process overlaid on the existing work of the NATs and TC. In fact, some of the implementation challenges appeared to stem from an in-group/out-group dynamic between those awardees who were already working together through TC and the NATs and those who were outside this process. Questions were raised about what, if anything, their work had to do with TC's overarching vision for the community. Unfortunately, despite the fact that the Community Foundation was aware of both initiatives, TOGETHER's work was not integrated into the Awards Program implementation in Treeline.
- *An examination of residents' health-related attitudes and behaviors:* The second health care funder has supported TC's work for years and is currently invested in an initiative there to promote healthy eating and active living with the ultimate goal of improving health outcomes for residents. Evaluation is a required element of the initiative, and See Change was selected to conduct the research, which was to be outcomes-based. We designed a methodology that would produce outcome data ranging from attitude changes over time (reported on pre- and post-intervention surveys) to details about changes in families' eating and exercising behaviors (gathered through digital journaling). While we were interested in looking for concrete outcomes for Treeline residents — such as reductions in body mass index among youth playing regularly in the soccer league — we knew that reporting on the outcomes alone would obscure much more meaningful information about the way in which these types of outcomes were produced.

The first significant challenge in implementing our evaluation was presenting the design to TC's steering committee. Participants raised excellent design questions: what exactly is the intervention that's being evaluated? Is it the community gardens program launched by one of the NATs? The health education program launched by another NAT? TC's advocacy for the urban redesign work at the city level that will create more walking pathways? The new "community listeners" model that TOGETHER is helping to implement with its small, ongoing contract? The youth soccer league founded by one of the civic unity awardees? These are profound evaluation questions, yet creating an overarching theory of change for TC was *not* part of our evaluation scope for this project. Because we know about the many strands of work in Treeline, we included an evaluation question in our design that asks about the *relative* contribution of the health care funder's support to the outcomes we may find; this question is an opportunity to discuss the context and history surrounding this particular grant in our final report to the funder.

Our conversations with TC members over the past year have led to productive shifts in their thinking that will perhaps bridge the perspectives and influence the practices of the program providers, funders, and residents at the table. The early dialogue about which intervention is responsible for health outcomes has evolved into a dialogue about the ways in which Treeline is becoming an environment that encourages healthy eating and active living through urban planning, education, and combined programmatic efforts. One TC member offered her own theory: "It's the *connections* that keep us healthy." In fact, the health care funder has requested a change in our evaluation scope, with less emphasis on measuring outcomes and more emphasis on documenting the process and mechanisms of change in Treeline.

- A measurement of the social return on investment of *a Treeline Futures employment initiative*: Our most recent work in Treeline has been the development of a logic model and framework for measuring the social return on investment of a worker-owned co-op program at Treeline Futures. The county's interest was

strictly in demonstrating that for each dollar invested in the employment of 20 women, a certain savings for the county is achieved through the presumed avoidance of otherwise poor outcomes for these women. Lessons that might be learned about the preconditions that must exist for such a model to work or be sustainable or the quality of the intervention that produces a social return were not prioritized in this evaluation design. Ironically, it was just these types of implementation challenges that dogged the pilot program, and, in the end, the county did not award funds beyond the planning grant.

One TC member offered her own theory: "It's the connections that keep us healthy."

Seeing the Whole Elephant

Our formal research findings, some complete and some in progress, are just one set of available information about civic engagement in Treeline. Our informal observations and knowledge of individuals in the community also provide a wealth of information about the complex, slow, and relationship-based nature of community change. So, what have we been able to see from our more comprehensive perspective?

Civic Engagement Can Lead to Lasting Civic Capacity

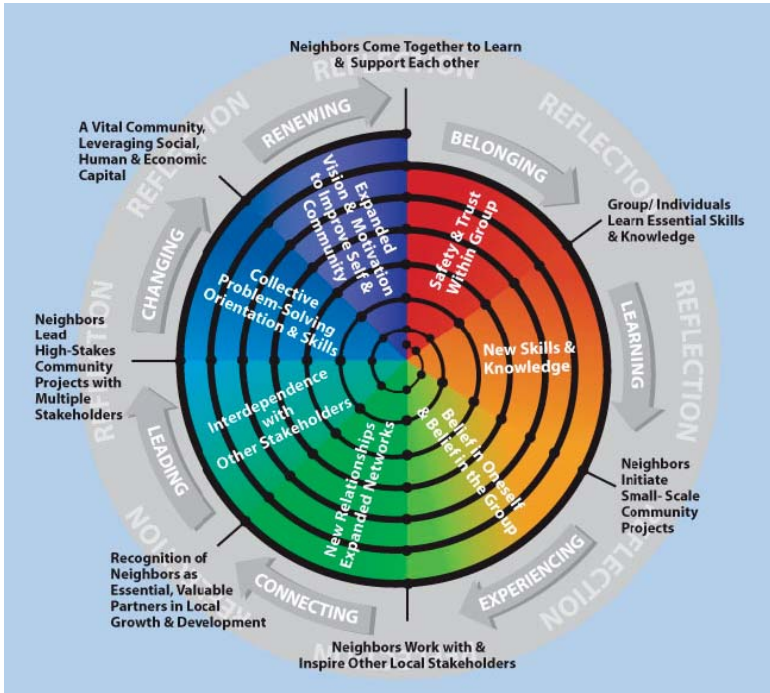
Treeline's story has many themes, including community health, demographic transitions, and economic development, to name a few. An analysis of all the available "data" could be conducted using any of these themes as a lens. But the lens of civic capacity development highlights Treeline's greatest contribution to knowledge about community change because it is in this domain that the multifaceted, organic, and hard-to-define intervention that is TC is most unique. The *content* of TC's work might change over time from a focus on community health to a focus on community literacy, for example. But

TABLE 1 Strategies, Intended Outcomes, and Results for Four Funded Initiatives in the Treeline Collaborative (TC)

Funder	Grant amount	Time frame	Theory of change	Strategy
Health care funder 1	\$90,000	Five years, 2000–2005	Involving residents in improving their community’s well-being leads to lasting change.	Fund TC to hire TOGETHER to develop and facilitate neighborhood action teams (NATs) that build the capacity of neighborhood residents to participate in community improvement efforts, including working with city planners.
Community Foundation Civic Leadership Program	\$300,000	Five years, 2003–2008	The positive difference made by everyday leaders within impoverished communities can be amplified by recognizing them and bringing them together with their peers.	Recognize and provide personal award to 12 everyday leaders in Treeline (four of them were NAT leaders). Provide facilitation, training, and support to this group. Ask them to work together to allocate \$60,000 per year for four years toward neighborhood improvement projects.
Health care funder 2	\$200,000	Two years, 2008–2009	Sustainable policy, environmental, and organizational practice changes in communities can transform local physical activity and food environments in ways that will decrease and prevent obesity.	Fund TC to do the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Train a cadre of “community listeners” who will build capacity among 1000 community residents to understand and participate in the planning, redevelopment design, and implementation of a healthy, built neighborhood. · Work with the city to implement existing redevelopment policy, advocate for and plan changes to the built environment that support greater access to nutritious foods and increased resident physical activity. · Develop new policies influencing land use design, transportation, and the built environment to promote healthy eating and increase physical activities. · Develop a pilot approach to educating a targeted set of families about nutrition, exercise, and health. These families will be participants in one or more TC projects.
County government	\$50,000	Six months, planning grant, 2008	Investment in programs and services that are results based, family oriented, collaborative, and available at critical points in the lives of children and families will improve family functioning and reduce the high cost of dependency.	Fund Treeline Futures to develop a “green” housecleaning co-op, employing women currently outside the mainstream economy, and expand the project once the pilot has proven the value of the model.

Expected outcomes	Results
<p>Involve neighborhood residents on local decision-making bodies.</p> <p>Build infrastructure of involved residents throughout Treeline neighborhoods.</p>	<p>NAT leaders populated the board and staff of TC. TC plays an active, ongoing role in advocacy with city government.</p> <p>NATs were created in over five neighborhoods. Currently, 10 NATs exist, although the focus of many is topical rather than neighborhood based (i.e., a health and safety action team).</p>
<p>Increase civic unity.</p> <p>Tangible community improvements resulting from work in areas chosen by the awardees.</p>	<p>A youth program to increase high school graduation rates was created and still exists.</p> <p>An emergency fund for residents was established.</p>
<p>Community listeners are active resources to the community on health and the built environment.</p> <p>City plans incorporate stakeholder priorities and built environment best practices into urban design, general plan, or other relevant city documents. At least part of the urban design plan will be funded and implemented in 5 to 10 years.</p> <p>Businesses are vested in the neighborhood's health and continue to improve policies and practices as a cultural norm and in response to consumer choices.</p> <p>Improved health of residents resulting from changed attitudes, built environment, and behaviors.</p>	<p>To date, 20 community listeners hours of training and are beginning to provide input to city planners on land use and urban redesign.</p> <p>A change in city priorities de-emphasized planned changes in Treeline Boulevard and prioritized the repurposing of the nearby Naval Weapons Station. As a result, the urban design process was discontinued, and TC efforts shifted toward the Naval Weapons Station. In the fall of 2008, over 120 people attended a community workshop about this effort.</p> <p>The Transportation Action Team consultant was appointed to the Senior and Disabled Advisory Commission of the County Metropolitan Transportation Commission.</p> <p>TC representatives were involved in the design review process of a new 16,000-square-foot market under construction in the neighborhood and are providing input to owners on food placement and food choices.</p> <p>Two community gardens established.</p> <p>Twenty families creating digital journals documenting changes in their eating and exercising behavior.</p>
<p>Savings of \$945,936 for the county over five years, based on the fees and taxes paid by co-op members, tax credits earned, uninsured health care costs avoided, and the value of local purchasing.</p>	<p>Project not implemented.</p>

FIGURE 1 Theory of Community Change from the Inside Out



the nature of TC — a true collaboration among stakeholders in which individual residents have as much power as institutional representatives — is what differentiates it from other community improvement initiatives. In keeping with Saegert’s (2004) definition, “civic capacity exists when a community can influence important decisions made by external public and private sector actors, when the community can access economic and social resources to achieve its own agenda, and when it can influence the content of the larger agenda.”

Effective Civic Engagement Requires Ongoing Cycles of Capacity Building

The residents of Treeline who became active participants in TC and other community improvement efforts developed the capacity to be civically engaged over the course of months and years of working on progressively more complex personal growth, group development, and community projects. TOGETHER’s NAT framework was the “engine” behind much of the civic engagement that occurred in Treeline that ultimately has led to the community’s strong civic capacity. Embedded

within the NAT framework are three essential elements of ongoing, effective civic engagement:

- A diverse network of empowered, informed residents geographically spread throughout the town
- Skills training through a highly effective experiential learning model, ensuring that residents who want to get involved have a high capacity to do so
- A bridge between informal civic engagement that happens in very local settings to a formal civic engagement structure, such as TC, that happens at the city and county levels.

The NAT model is iterative rather than linear; it is assumed that individuals go through the same steps repeatedly, each time achieving a higher level of capacity. For example, a NAT member’s first project might be helping to coordinate a health fair at a local mall. Years later, that same NAT member might be involved in introducing a proposal for legislation to the city council. But in both cases, the individual would receive appropriate support and training.

Without the development of residents' capacity to be involved in local decision making, resident engagement can erode or devolve into token representation. As suggested by Kubo, Wong, and Morales (2004), writing about the Hewlett Foundation's Neighborhood Improvement Initiative, "the most important impact of a comprehensive community initiative may be the lasting learned capacity among participants to continue to make change in themselves and their communities."

Civic Engagement Work Is Not Free From Politics and Personal Dynamics

For better or worse, there is a web of personal and professional relationships behind the scenes in Treeline that have sometimes facilitated progress toward broad civic engagement and other times impeded it. The dynamics of these relationships have determined much about the rate of the community's overall progress toward long-term goals, yet relationship dynamics are not usually assessed through evaluation. Our presence as trusted outsiders in the community over the past five years has meant that we are privy to information that has allowed us to predict the success of key alliances or to see trouble brewing on the horizon — but we have had no professional forum in which to discuss our observations with stakeholders who could do anything about it.

Civic Engagement Can Be Its Own Worst Enemy

Civic engagement of community residents can be a romantic notion. Self-determination is unquestionably a social good. But in Treeline, as perhaps in other highly successful civic engagement initiatives, a common outcome of building residents' capacity to be engaged in civic life is that their skills become professionally marketable and desirable by institutions.

Certain individuals in Treeline, such as Carol, were hired into paying positions within TC or other organizations as their skills developed. On the surface, this outcome seems a positive fruition of a long-term capacity-building process. But the shift from community volunteer to paid staff person can be perceived negatively by other community volunteers who may feel envious or who may

question whether the individual's allegiance is with the new employer or the community itself. Human nature being what it is, this situation is probably unavoidable and not necessarily a serious threat to the overall progress of a civic engagement or community improvement initiative. However, it underscores the importance of a mechanism for *continuous* civic engagement. Efforts that build that capacity of a single group or generation of community residents to be civically engaged may have limited long-term effects or may even backfire if other residents react to a perceived elitism or undesirable shift in power. An ideal situation might be that a former volunteer who becomes a paid staff person be placed in a role responsible for maintaining close community connections and continuing to bring new voices into the mix.

Taking the Blinders Off: Collective Evaluation

We have longed for professional peers with whom to share our observations about Treeline and, more important, with whom to develop appropriate feedback loops for information that might lead to improvements of the overall community change process or vital course corrections that might avert setbacks. Many of the funders, practitioners, and residents in Treeline may wish for the very same thing. A tremendous amount of goodwill, hard work, and financial resources have been invested in this long-term community change effort; it is very reasonable to assume that all stakeholders would want to stay focused on the momentum and sustainability of the civic engagement they've worked so hard to envision and create. Yet we encounter in Treeline the typical myopia of our sector: we usually invest, develop programming, or conduct research in only *one* aspect of a very complex social system at a time. We fail to recognize, much less anticipate, the unintentional yet unavoidable ways that multiple investments in a single place will influence each other (Midgley, 2007). Even the Blind Men have a leg up on us: at least they *talked with one another* about what they believed to be true!

If the NATs are, in fact, the "engine" of civic engagement in Treeline — the heart of the elephant — then their diminished role should be of

concern to all interested parties in Treeline. Will the “community listener” model be as effective at recruiting and preparing future generations of engaged residents as the NAT model has been? What elements of the NAT model are the most important to preserve? Will the tremendous knowledge about civic engagement held by the skilled practitioners at TOGETHER be transferred to others who will continue the work? Answering these questions seems from our perspective to be a high priority for any future research conducted in Treeline. But who will articulate this — or any other — research agenda that might nurture the work forward?

We have begun to envision a *collective evaluation*, designed, funded, and implemented by a team of key stakeholders in a place-based initiative. Such a model makes certain assumptions that might challenge common beliefs and practices in the philanthropic sector. For example, *all* funders in a given geography would be potentially accountable for desired changes. Funded work that does not align with an overarching theory of community change might be questioned and considered a lower priority. Similarly, nonprofit organizations would be encouraged to develop complementary programming specifically designed to reach outcomes that are part of community-wide change, not only change in the population they serve. Evaluators working with various funders and nonprofits would take on different components of an already defined research agenda, and their reports would be available to all stakeholders in the community change process. Funders and community-based practitioners alike would be encouraged to think of their efforts as interdependent contributions to change rather than as isolated or singular solutions. Implementation and research would unfold over time, with feedback mechanisms in place to encourage real-time learning and strategic course correction. We would slowly make our way around the whole elephant, carefully considering all the parts within our reach and listening thoughtfully to our colleagues with a different vantage point.

Both grantees and funders could take concrete steps to move the field in this direction. Grantees in a single geography could come together to

develop a common theory of community change and a useful research agenda that would provide critical feedback on their individual and collective contributions toward this change. As a group, they could ask a cadre of funders already invested in their programs to support this research agenda *collectively*. Interim and final reports of such a research project would be occasions for community and foundation stakeholders to come together for learning, reflection, and strategic course corrections. Similarly, funders who are aware of peer organizations supporting other initiatives in a community in which they are also invested could initiate dialogues with these partners that might yield more complete theories of change and evaluation strategies that take multiple interventions into account.

We look forward to this type of innovation in the design and study of place-based initiatives so that learning of the kind we’ve been afforded in Treeline is not left to chance. Only by working better together will our blinders truly come off.

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