



E-PARCC

COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE INITIATIVE

Syracuse University

Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs

Program for the Advancement of Research on Conflict and Collaboration

Elusive Community in South Park

Part B

Claudia needed a new plan. Since last summer, the City held three contentious meetings with various sub-groups in the South Park community. In all three meetings, the community representatives had been less than thrilled with the City's efforts. In the last meeting, attended mostly by South Park's Latino community leaders, Claudia had announced that four city-wide Latino service providers were putting together a proposal for a package of services to bring anti-gang, youth, and family services to South Park. Yet, with only two weeks before the budget was due, there hadn't been enough time for sufficient outreach to the community to vet the funding package with community leaders and grassroots activists. South Park's Latinos did not feel that the citywide organizations were affiliated with their community and resented the city's decision-making process for granting the funding. Additionally, the funding allocated in the final budget was far less than what was requested. As a result, there was even less community trust with the City than before.

Claudia felt the pressing need to turn the situation around and show South Park residents that the City was committed and listening to them. Claudia had taken a two-pronged approach from the beginning, working in the community to

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build a long-term, trusting relationship and taking action within City government to respond to South Park's immediate needs. Despite the dramatic negative responses at the public meetings, Claudia felt that the City had made some small but steady progress on both fronts and needed to keep the momentum going.

Small Neighborhood Improvements

Since July, Claudia held regular interdepartmental team (IDT) meetings with representatives from Seattle's various City agencies and departments to coordinate efforts to improve services in South Park. By September, some small but significant improvements had been realized. Overgrown vegetation had been cut back in eight public areas. In just three weeks, Seattle City Light had replaced dead bulbs in more than 300 streetlights. They also added new lights in areas where lighting had been inadequate. A pay phone that had been a drug-dealing hot spot was now turned off every night from 7 p.m. to 8 a.m. on a trial basis. If problems continued, it would be removed all together. In general, South Park's physical environment had seen modest improvements.

One of the most exciting things that happened was the opening of the South Park branch of the Seattle Public Library. The community had been agitating for 98 years to get a library! Though the new library was already in the works before the City's intense engagement efforts began, the fact that it opened in September helped the mood in the community quite a bit. Reflecting South Park's diversity, 30% of the library's catalogue was in Spanish and several librarians were bilingual.

In October, the Seattle Police Department and King County Sheriff's Office signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) stating that whichever jurisdiction received a 911 call from South Park would respond. Because Seattle's city limits ran through South Park, prior to the MOU, responses to 911 calls had entailed a confusing process of figuring out the jurisdiction from which a call originated before emergency personnel from the appropriate jurisdiction could be dispatched. Frequently, residents would call 911, reach a City operator, and be told the location of the crime was not in the City's jurisdiction and that they had to call the County. This obviously slowed responses, making hazardous situations more dangerous. The MOU solved what had been a very big problem for the community.

Claudia also began talking with officials at the state Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) about improving South Park residents' access to food stamps and other benefits. Eventually, the state arranged for South Park residents

to apply for and receive benefits at an office in nearby White Center, a short bus ride from South Park, instead of at the Rainier Valley office, which had required an hour and a half trip by bus. Since more than half of South Park's 4000 residents received some kind of assistance through DSHS, the change had a substantial impact in the community.

Building Trust

All the while, Claudia was active in the community, attending meetings of the South Park Neighborhood Association and any other meeting she heard about. At these meetings, she would give updates about the things the City was doing in the neighborhood. The long-time members of the SPNA were thrilled. They had never enjoyed this level of information and responsiveness before.

Claudia also met with Latinos in South Park at every opportunity – having coffee, attending meetings of existing groups, doing anything she could to establish connections. At first, she faced residual resentment from community leaders whose organizations had not received funding in the recent City budget allocation. Only painstaking, face-to-face explanations eventually helped the grassroots Latino leaders see that the City hadn't intended to play favorites with the budget. For example, Mario Paredes, the Executive Director of Consejo, explained that Consejo had been serving South Park residents from its Rainier Valley location for years, and that their new funding from the City would allow them to open an office in South Park, providing more responsive youth services in the neighborhood.

Through these sorts of discussions about what organizations were and were not part of the South Park community, Claudia discovered that neighborhood residents had been unaware that many of the services they utilized were supported by City funds that flowed through non-profit organizations such as Consejo. The misunderstanding stemmed from the fact that the Latino community had never had a relationship with the City that allowed the City to report on what services it provided or funded in South Park.

Slowly, but surely, Claudia began to feel more acceptance and trust from both the South Park Neighborhood Association and South Park's Latino community. People who had screamed at her in the first meeting she convened now invited her into their homes to talk about issues and opportunities. As she looked back on her initial attempts to understand the community by gathering information from City departments, she now recognized that, while the information was useful, the internal nature of her information-gathering process with City colleagues had done little to connect her with the community. There was no

substitute, she thought, for being on the ground and hearing residents' perspectives directly.

An Idea for Action

As she grew more familiar with the different communities in South Park, Claudia noticed there was little interaction between the Anglo and Latino residents. She also noticed that the issues they raised seemed disconnected. The Latino community was very focused on the present safety and future prospects of their children, while the older, Anglo residents who dominated the neighborhood's formal associations like SPNA and SPARC were more concerned with developing their businesses and repairing failing infrastructure, the same priorities they had laid out in the neighborhood plan ten years prior.

In order to succeed in her task of identifying the needs and priorities of South Park, Claudia needed a way to unify these two disparate sets of priorities into one set of community-wide priorities. Otherwise, she recognized the needs of one group would always be at odds with those of the other, creating a situation where it would be hard for the City to score a "win." Some group would always be left out. To solve this problem, she suggested to the Mayor that the community and City work together to develop an Action Agenda. The South Park Action Agenda would be a document that prioritized the community's needs and provided actionable items for implementation. The process to develop the South Park Action Agenda would pull together representatives from the different communities that make up South Park and ask them to work together as a committee to develop a common vision.

After gaining the Mayor's support, Claudia held a meeting in the community to introduce the idea of the South Park Action Agenda. There were 40 people at the meeting, which was held April 10, 2006, the same day as a huge immigrant rights rally in downtown Seattle. Initially, some people who had been involved in SPNA for a long time didn't see the point in creating an Action Agenda. "You still haven't done anything with the neighborhood plan we came up with ten years ago," was the basic sentiment. Being largely unaffected by the gang violence disrupting the Latino community, they were not tuned in to the new needs in the neighborhood that had emerged since the last plan was written in the mid-1990s. "At the same time, there was also this feeling like if we have the Mayor's attention now, we should take advantage of that to tell him what we want," says Lora Suggs, who became Chair of the SPNA shortly after the Action Agenda process began. Then, despite some participants' reservations, there were others at the meeting,

both Anglo and Latino, who wanted to participate on the Action Agenda committee.

By the end of April, a neighborhood committee had started meeting, with Claudia facilitating. Approximately one third of the participants were from the Latino community. Some worked in service organizations that served the community; others had started their own grassroots organizations; a few were City employees. There were also a couple of high school students who were very active in the youth community. Several members of the SPNA, including the new SPNA chair, Lora Suggs, were also on the committee, as were some older, Anglo residents unaffiliated with any neighborhood organization. Most of the initial meetings focused on how to ensure that committee members could represent the voice of the larger South Park community effectively.

From the beginning of the neighborhood committee meetings, racial tensions between South Park's Latinos and Anglos were evident. Both Latinos and Anglos on the South Park Action Agenda committee felt that the committee meetings were uncomfortable. "Certain people on the committee would make it uncomfortable for any person of color to participate," said Officer Diaz. "Because of frequent comments about my background and citizenship, I had to explain numerous times that I was born in this country. I can definitely understand why some attendees thought the meetings were racist."

In addition to more direct comments about race, it appeared to Latinos on the committee that some of the committee members affiliated with the SPNA weren't willing to make an effort to bring grassroots Latinos up to speed on the issues being discussed. Recalls one Latino participant, "the Anglos on the committee basically said, 'We've provided translations. There's nothing more we can do.' They didn't really understand that the cultural differences go beyond language — that it is more about trying to bring people up to speed on how it all works, too." Because governmental processes in many Latin American countries were so different than those in Seattle, some Latinos felt lost in the meetings, and wondered whether, or how, the results would influence the City government. Some Latinos on the committee felt as if they were trying to jump into a conversation that had started several years earlier. On more than one occasion, Latinos on the committee raised concerns about whether the lack of accommodation stemmed from racism. A few Anglos withdrew from the committee, offended by the charges. "People were so nervous about the perceptions that they were not being as inclusive as they could be and were very tense about accusations of racism. For white people, it is really one of the worst

things to be called a racist,” remembers Jacque Larrainzar, who staffed the committee for the Seattle Office of Civil Rights.

There were also some SPNA members who were genuinely concerned that their efforts to engage the Latino community had been so unsuccessful. Lora Suggs recalls, “when I went to my first meeting of the SPNA, I noticed that pretty much everyone there was white and I asked about it. The response was ‘We don’t really know, we’ve tried, but this is just the people who come.’” As an organization, they felt that they had tried to motivate participation from Latinos in the neighborhood with no success. Now, here they were on the South Park Action Agenda committee taking heat for not doing more. Lora recalled one meeting in which she was confronted by one Latina about SPNA’s lack of outreach to the Latino community. In response, Lora noted that SPNA had tried several times to get Latinos to participate on the SPNA, but with no luck. “I asked her what she would recommend—what could we do that would work. And she just said, ‘It’s not my job to tell you who I am as a culture.’ I was so surprised. I mean, if you tell us we are doing it wrong, why wouldn’t you want to tell us how to do it right? We don’t know what we don’t know.”

Despite the climate of racial tension, the group of 45 residents and community service providers still made progress on the project. They identified five main priorities and divided into corresponding sub-committees. The five sub-committees were Business and Transportation, Community Engagement, Environment and Physical Improvements, Public Safety, and Youth Development. A team of 4 to 8 City staff supported each subcommittee. Most of the Community Engagement committee members were Latinos. Not surprisingly, the Physical Improvements committee and the Business and Transportation committee were primarily Anglo. Officer Diaz was surprised that the Public Safety committee was the smallest committee. “I tried to get people from the community to be on the committee, but they just said, ‘You already know our issues. You can represent us.’”

After a couple of meetings, the Latinos on the community engagement subcommittee decided they wanted to meet separately as well. In a meeting conducted mostly in Spanish, they talked about how exciting this all was. Jacque Larrainzar, who worked for the Seattle Office of Civil Rights and staffed the Community Engagement committee, recalls the enthusiasm with which the Latino committee members approached their involvement in the South Park Action Agenda. “They all felt like, ‘This is a great opportunity to get OUR community a voice in the process. We have never had a voice before.’” Motivated by the desire to see the Latino community as organized as the SPNA, this group decided that

they wanted to get grassroots Latinos involved in shaping the action agenda by creating a survey. They proposed that each subcommittee come up with five questions for the survey. Claudia offered that the City could cover the cost of printing and translation into Spanish and Vietnamese. Then, each of the Latinos on the Community Engagement subcommittee would take the survey to twenty people in the community, getting grassroots input into the priorities for shaping the Action Agenda.

At the next full committee meeting, Emma Morena, who worked in the City's Office of Culture and Art, presented the idea. "That is the stupidest idea I have ever heard!" said someone who had been hired by the South Park Business Association to help them in their efforts to liaise with the City. Many of the SPNA members and other Anglo community members felt less strongly, but still opposed the idea. "If the grassroots Latinos wanted to participate, they would be here," was the dominant sentiment. "We already have a process and we need to honor that. You're trying to derail everything!" said one participant. When Paulina and Emma tried to explain why they thought the survey was important, they were shouted down by some of the Anglo committee members.

"It is stressful just to remember it, it was so awful," says Claudia. "People were actually yelling and Paulina and Emma and everyone were just sitting there with their mouths hanging open in shock. After all the talk about an inclusive process and embracing diversity, it had come down to this explosion and nobody knew how to reel it back in."

Claudia managed to calm everyone down. By the end of the meeting, they had split into their subcommittees, which would each write five questions and turn them into Claudia the following week. They would worry about how to resolve the disagreement later. For now, they would draft and turn in the questions.

However, it appeared that serious damage had been done to the planning process and Claudia's hopes of uniting the two sub-communities. None of the Latinos attended the next meeting or many of the future meetings and Claudia felt she didn't have a solid enough relationship with them to re-enlist their participation. Even the most passionate and aggressive advocate among them did not want to return, citing the personal toll the racially tense environment of the meetings had taken on her. The remaining community members kept pushing forward while Claudia and other city staff tried, without any success, to bring some Latinos back to the table.

Soon it was late June 2006 and once again the budget would be due in August. If there was any hope of securing City funds for the community's priorities, they had to complete the Action Agenda process before the budget was finalized. The Mayor had specifically directed Claudia to engage the Latino community in South Park and to build trust with them, so she knew she needed to get the Latinos back to the table. She really needed the entire neighborhood committee to work together and work through or around the racial tension that had come up. She had very little time, she was exhausted from the stress of pushing the Action Agenda process forward, and she worried that the South Park Action Agenda would be a failure if Latinos did not have a voice in the process. She needed a solution and fast.