

A Seat at the Proverbial Table: Shifting Community Engagement on Everett's Casino Road

The Community Foundation of Snohomish County (CFSC) creates community impact by connecting people, opportunities and resources. We help individuals and families leave a legacy by creating funds that focus on what they care about. We support nonprofit organizations by providing grants, workshops, consulting and networking to help nonprofits thrive. Over the years, we have grown from being an organization that focused on grant making and transactions to an organization that is focused on community engagement and community building.

In 2016, the Foundation was approached by a local funder looking to fund a project very different from anything the Foundation had done before. Using a collective impact, two-generational approach, the goal was to form a cross-sector collaborative focused on creating the conditions families need to thrive in a historically impoverished community. The South Everett community of Casino Road was chosen to be the focus of the project. As the highest poverty community in our county, there was no doubt Casino Road was in need of support. At the same time, there was a long history of service providers and families collaborating and working together to make life on Casino better for those that call it home. This funding would provide the ability to more intentionally coordinate, align, and expand those efforts to help families in Casino Road. In April of 2017, the Casino Road Initiative (CRI) was officially formed.

Challenges and Obstacles

From its inception, the Initiative agreed on two core values: equity and community engagement. We wanted to make sure we did this work *with* the community rather than *to* it or *for* it. There was a history of collaborative efforts on Casino Road, several of which had created mistrust between the organizations involved and the community. We wanted to do this work differently. Because Casino Road is home to many different immigrant groups, we knew this project would need to intentionally target the systemic barriers to equity that these families face on a daily basis. As such, there was a lot of talk of community needing “a seat at the table.” For most people, this referred to ensuring residents were welcomed into decision-making positions in order to correct power imbalances that have a history of negatively affecting communities of color.

In current conversations on community engagement, giving community “a seat at the table” is something you hear a lot. Without doubt, it is a well-intentioned turn away from traditional community engagement methods that at best sought resident participation in community change efforts and at worst passive approval. Including community members in spaces quite often held by educated, middle class – and often white – professionals is a clear attempt at sharing power and acknowledging the context expertise residents bring about their own community.

For the Casino Road Initiative, this approach quite literally translated into inviting community members onto our Steering Committee to sit around the decision making table. In hopes of making the experience more equitable, members of the committee were offered a \$5,000

stipend in their first year of service followed by a \$2,500 stipend the second year to ensure they were also being paid for their time. However, after a year of meetings, we came to the realization that a seat at the table is not nearly enough. Despite our good intentions, the five community residents that made up our 16 person Steering Committee had dwindled to three. It turned out that the proverbial “table” was actually dominated by white, professional norms and values that did not create an environment where our diverse community members felt invited or able to actively participate. We were now required to think more critically about how we entrenched community-led decision making into the Initiative in an equitable and sustainable way. While this is an ongoing learning process, we can present the following lessons-learned.

Convening and Maintaining Relationships

Without doubt, the most important lesson we have learned in our journey so far is the importance of strong, authentic relationships with community. Because the Community Foundation was very much an outsider to the Casino Road community at the inception of this Initiative, months of legwork was done to ensure the Foundation was learning from folks who had been well connected to the community for years and involving those individuals and organizations as collaborative partners. By doing so, we were able to create a steering committee in which the majority of partner representatives were either from the Casino Road community or already had strong, trusting relationships with Casino Road community. This has been crucial to creating a decision-making group that both has its finger on the community pulse and is trusted by the community.

In addition to creating a steering committee that is connected to the community, we have found a lot of success in hiring a coordinator for the Initiative that also has existing relationships with the community. This individual has been a trusted “face” of the Initiative and as such has been able to act as a liaison between the community and the Initiative. In our experience, the success of this person has been dependent on a high amount of value being placed on building authentic and meaningful relationships with community leaders. Organizational expectations needed to shift so that staff time spent building and maintaining relationships with the community was highly valued. This meant giving staff the flexibility to work nontraditional hours, to attend community events, and show up to community invitations. Relationship building takes time, and trusting relationships with community can only be maintained when it is clear you are there to support the community. Communities of color and low-income communities are often asked to donate their time and knowledge to the work of local initiatives. Because of that, it is essential that community relationships be built on the understanding that the initiative is there to support the community, not the other way around. Currently, the coordinator for the Initiative meets regularly with community leaders and residents in order to maintain those trusting relationships.

Organizational Change

In addition to aligning organizational expectations to the importance of building relationships, we also found that true community engagement could not occur if the Community Foundation and its partner organizations did not have a shared understanding of racial equity. Our initial attempt to imbed resident representatives into our Steering Committee demonstrated a need to build organizational capacity around working with and empowering communities of color. Only then could resident representatives contribute meaningfully to decision making instead of becoming a “tokenized” representative of their community. In our first year, all members of our steering committee attended a two-day training on institutional racism and the Community Foundation began building organizational capacity for diversity, equity, and inclusion among both staff and board members. While this is an ongoing process, we feel strongly that a successful community engagement strategy starts with creating an organizational culture that fosters authentic and meaningful resident involvement.

In addition to internal work around diversity, equity, and inclusion, the Initiative also shifted financial resources from a more traditional program-centric funding model to a community-centric one. Alongside the yearly stipends offered to residents serving on our steering committee, Initiative dollars have also been used to support grassroots community groups and build capacity of local leaders. This financial decision reflects our value of community leadership and acknowledging community members as context experts on their own community. One of those groups – called the Madres Latinas de Casino Road – has started directly partnering with the Casino Road Initiative in order to leverage administrative and organizational resources of the Initiative alongside the context expertise and social capital of the Madres. This collaboration has increased the capacity of the Madres to support their community while simultaneously strengthening relationships between the Initiative and Casino Road residents. While moving away from funding direct services has been a transition for many members of our steering committee, we know that investing in the community will help build a sustainable model of resident leadership moving forward.

Systemic Inequities

In order to address the institutional and systemic inequities that affect the low-income, immigrant population we serve in our community, we knew that the CRI would need to be functioning at a systems rather than programmatic level. For us, this has meant starting with the organizations and institutions that serve the Casino Road community. In collaboration with four of our partner organizations, we are currently working on creating an equity framework that we will use to train our community partners across the non-profit, educational, and social service sectors. We plan to simultaneously partner with a local organization that offers a college credit-bearing course focused on building the capacity of Casino Road parents to advocate for their families and community. By creating cohorts of empowered and engaged parents alongside institutions that are

prepared to interact with those parents in equitable ways, community residents will develop the skills to guide the work of the Initiative within organizational cultures that support community leadership. For us, developing the capacity of both organizations and residents has been key to growing authentic community engagement.

Co-Creating Community Solutions

Our initial attempt at community engagement led us to thinking critically about our own internal capacity to interact equitably with community. Nonetheless, we have had several successful interactions with the Casino Road community that have directly influenced decision-making and significant community change. Our first successful community engagement attempt was at the National Night Out event hosted at our local library. We knew that the five community members sitting on our steering committee would not be able to speak for the entire Casino Road community, and we wanted to ensure our long term planning was in line with the wants and needs of the community. Knowing that National Night Out has traditionally been very well attended by Casino Road families, we put together a volunteer group of Casino Road residents representing a variety of cultures and languages. Working with a data specialist from our local United Way, we created a survey that this group of bilingual volunteers would be asking families attending the event. With a group of 10 volunteers, we were able to survey over 130 Casino Road families on their perception of the strengths and needs of their community. This data was analyzed alongside similar focus group and interview data spanning the last 10 years to create a Casino Road data report that has played an integral role in the formation of the CRI's mission, vision, and goals.

An analysis of the report found that the primary need in the community was a community center to which families could come to learn, access resources and services, and strengthen social connection and peer-to-peer relationships. Given that shared space is extremely limited in the Casino Road area, families and individuals felt this was a much-needed component for any strategy moving forward in their community. Knowing that it would be vital for a project such as this to be guided by the families of Casino Road, in January 2018 we partnered with the Pomegranate Center, an organization with over 30 years' experience with facilitating community design processes of public gathering spaces. As part of this process, we convened a diverse group of 12 community leaders tasked with planning a large community meeting in which community members would have the opportunity to voice their opinion on the design of the Community Hub. In spring of 2018, we completed the community design process with over 125 Casino Road community members and volunteers. The results of that process directly contributed to both the physical design of the building as well as the services and resources to be offered there. When construction begins, we will prioritize local laborers and artists to continue building community ownership of the space. This has been our biggest success in co-creating innovative solutions to community-identified problems so far.

Signs of an Equitable Future

Despite being in the early phases of this work, we are already seeing promising signs of a more equitable future for Casino Road. Organizations are working collaboratively to reduce systemic barriers for families here and working hard to prioritize community voice in decision-making. Additionally, organizations are coming together to think critically about how organizations need to change in order to create spaces and cultures that invite authentic community involvement. Most importantly, we have seen a drastic increase in community leadership and decision-making. Residents are feeling empowered to make decisions that directly affect their families and their community. This community empowerment combined with institutional change and an influx of financial resources makes us hopeful for a more equitable future for Casino Road.

Conclusion: Lessons Learned

After a year and a half of this work, we have come to learn that it is not as simple as giving community a seat at the table. The table itself must be ready to support community involvement, which can be a long and difficult journey. Furthermore, we have started to change the question we are asking ourselves. Instead of asking how we can increase community engagement in our initiative, we are asking ourselves how we can instead align our resources and time to the strengths, aspirations, and work of the community. This new question has required a paradigm shift in both thought and action, but has drastically improved our relationships with the community and our ability to respond to community need. We continue to grapple with what sustainable community leadership will look like, but our shift towards prioritizing relationships and capacity building for both organizations and residents makes us confident we have made significant and positive strides towards authentic community engagement.