

How an Immigrant Community is Using a Neighborhood Park to Speak Up



The Trust for Public Land is working to renovate Kiwanis Methow Park, a small neighborhood park in the City of Wenatchee’s southern end. Known as the Apple Capital of the World, the Wenatchee Valley has long employed migrant workers in local orchards, but in recent decades the families of seasonal workers have settled and made the valley their home. Many community members refer to South Wenatchee as “Little Tijuana” due to the large number of Spanish-speaking immigrants and Latino-owned businesses.

More than 4,200 people live within a 10-minute walk of Kiwanis Methow Park, which serves predominately low-income and Latino residents. Both the neighborhood and the park have seen little investment from the City over the past few decades. At the same time, the community’s lack of representation in local government has created a structural disconnect between neighborhood needs and City resources. Since 2015, The Trust for Public Land has been working with community members and the City to address issues of health and livability through the renovation of Kiwanis Methow Park.

The Trust for Public Land’s Approach

We believe that both our process and its results are transformational—that when a community collaborates with The Trust for Public Land to create a park, it is better able to address inequities well beyond the boundaries of the park. We have developed an engagement process to nurture a community’s vision and to support local leaders to mobilize for action. Across the country, we have seen this grassroots process address complex and seemingly intractable neighborhood challenges, while also building social capital and cultivating the next generation of civic leaders.



Local folk dancers measure the site for a future kiosk at Kiwanis Methow Park.

For a community park to have a transformative impact, we generally find that three primary elements must be in place or in process: 1) The local government must be supportive, engaged, and in dialogue with local residents; 2) Local residents must be organized around a collective vision; and 3) Funding must exist not only to implement the project but also to resource the local community so that they can participate authentically. If any of these three elements is weak or missing, we work to build capacity and ultimately close the gap.

Addressing Systematic Inequities

South Wenatchee is a majority-Latino neighborhood in a city where two out of three residents are white, and residents report that cultural and language barriers contribute to a lack of dialogue between residents and their local government. Many residents also note an imbalance in investment between the City's south and north sides, reporting marked differences in the quality of sidewalks, street lights, and quantity of street trees in South Wenatchee. This imbalance is reflected in Kiwanis Methow Park, which is one of the lowest quality parks in the City despite serving more children than any other park in the City.



Illustration of the future Kiwanis Methow Park kiosk and plaza.

As we conducted early outreach in South Wenatchee, many residents shared stories that highlight how the built and social environments in the neighborhood are not only barriers to civic engagement but are also significant barriers for health. The North Central Washington Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA) identified the top two concerns for the region as mental health care access and a lack of access to healthcare. The CHNA's findings and survey data mirror our own in reports that South Wenatchee's infrastructure and lack of culturally sup-

portive resources keep people inside, discourage social interaction, and disconnect vulnerable residents from health resources and education.

A common report from community members is that South Wenatchee lacks a "sense of place" and that the neighborhood's built environment does not encourage a sense of ownership and pride. More than 500 residents participated in the early concept design process for Kiwanis Methow Park, which used images and interactive exercises to identify community preferences for the park's design elements. Given the community's request for a gathering area and "central hub," the concept design process sought to identify a design that encouraged feelings of belonging and cultural connection.

The community quickly identified the park's main feature and organizing element in a "kiosko" pavilion. As the central element in most urban plazas in Mexico and Central America, kioskos serve as the meeting place for both political and cultural events. The planned kiosko for Kiwanis Methow Park has already galvanized the community around the park design and has become a rallying element for members within the Latino community. More than creating a "Latino-themed" park, the project will create new common ground for the entire City.

Developing and Maintaining Community Relationships

Initial attempts to gather design feedback for Kiwanis Methow Park were unsuccessful. South Wenatchee residents face logistical barriers to participation, often balancing multiple jobs, childcare, and other priorities. Further, we entered the community as outsiders and initially struggled to connect with key leaders in the neighborhood.

Changing course, The Trust for Public Land stopped organizing our own events and began attending popular, community-driven events, like the Northwest Mariachi Festival, a regional music and dance festival

in Wenatchee that attracts more than 2,000 attendees every March. This shift was a watershed moment for our program and allowed us to build relationships with the community on its own terms.

Through this work, we met Misael Fajardo-Perez, a local Lutheran Minister in South Wenatchee with a long history of organizing and a holistic approach to community development. Misael helped to highlight the broader opportunity for the park to address “non-park” issues like isolation and depression in the neighborhood. Eventually, Misael joined our team as a volunteer organizer. In that role, he introduced important community leaders to the project and ensured we got honest feedback and direction.

Since meeting Misael, we contracted with two additional community organizers, a retired teacher from the neighborhood and a local student at the community college, Teresa Bendito. As a volunteer for the Community for Advancement of Family Education (CAFÉ), Bendito was advocating for youth development opportunities and civic participation in the neighborhood and immediately saw the benefit of improving the neighborhood’s neglected community gathering space. These organizers have helped nurture important relationships and act as informal spokespeople for the park renovation. Their work has helped sustain the City’s interest in the project and help connect the park project to broader community development issues.

“Using art, food and music, we were able to overcome skepticism by South Wenatchee neighbors who didn’t think the city would follow through.”

***Misael Fajardo-Perez,
Lutheran Minister***



A recent design workshop hosted by the Parque Padrinos.

Two years later, Bendito led a group of neighborhood volunteers to create a stewardship group for the park. The group is formed around the cultural practice of a “padrino” or godparent, which is a structure used to support many events within the Latino community from weddings, births, quinceañeras, and baptisms. Padrinos help to raise money for local events, but more importantly, the title connotes a long-term relationship between the Padrino and newly married couple, newborn child, teenage girl, or—in this case—neighborhood park.

With more than two dozen members, the Parque Padrinos are some of the park’s strongest advocates and an essential link to the community. They provide residents regular updates on the park design and opportunities to provide feedback, while also continuing to build community support. To advocate for the park, the Padrinos have been attending city council meetings, and for many in the group, these meetings related to the park have been their first opportunity for direct participation with local government. Seeing the value of civic engagement, they are already planning to tackle issues beyond the park, like underrepresentation of the Latino community on Wenatchee City government committees and councils.

The Trust for Public Land is supporting Parque Padrinos with funding for training, compensation for the group's leaders, and a small fund to support community-led events in the park. We are working with local leaders to identify opportunities to fund the group longer-term so that members have access to resources to keep the park programmed and activated well beyond ribbon-cutting next year. This summer, some of the Padrinos will travel to Los Angeles to meet with and learn from Equipo Verde, a grassroots group of mothers and grandmothers who organize volunteer cleanup days for green alleyways in South Los Angeles.

Co-creating Community Solutions

We quickly realized that conversations with South Wenatchee residents were more effective when the park project moved to the background and focused on building an understanding of higher priority concerns for those living near the park. We learned that local residents envisioned the renovation of Kiwanis Methow as an opportunity to address broader community issues like youth empowerment, cultural representation, and public health. Through hundreds of informal conversations and targeted outreach events, we were able to understand the challenges of living in South Wenatchee and develop a plan to leverage the park design to both address socioeconomic barriers and amplify points of community pride.

When developing parks, The Trust for Public Land employs principles of Creative Placemaking: a process where community members apply arts and culture to shape their public spaces. This process has empowered South Wenatchee residents to bring their visions to life, building a stronger sense of collective ownership. Community members value their Mexican heritage and traditions around music, art, and religion as an important part of the local culture. The high school in Wenatchee is known nationally for its mariachi program. We worked to design a space for the neighborhood to celebrate cultural traditions like mariachi and ballet folklórico, while creating a central, walkable hub for important community events like baptisms and quinceañeras.



Terry Valdez (left), a local artist, and Misael Fajardo-Perez (right), a Lutheran minister.

Local artist and volunteer Terry Valdez is deeply involved in the effort to revitalize South Wenatchee. In 2012, he worked with a team from American Institute of Architects, advising the City on how design methods could address community challenges. Terry was supporting the group's public outreach work but knew that getting input from neighborhood residents would require creative approaches. His team placed chalkboards all over town with an invitation for people to "Imagine South Wenatchee" in both Spanish and English. The response was extraordinary and set the stage for the role art can play in South Wenatchee to bring the community together. Today, Terry is the lead artist organizer for Kiwanis Methow Park, facilitating family art-based activities in the park.

In partnership with Terry and several local arts organizations, The Trust for Public Land secured a \$100,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. The new initiative brings together local artists in South Wenatchee with healthcare organizations to leverage the power of local pride in arts and culture as a deliv-

ery method for community-based health education and activities. In partnership with Confluence Health, the local hospital system in North Central Washington, we are also working with EPA's "Healthy Places, Healthy People" program to identify opportunities to use the park for a new Promotores de Salud or Community Health Worker program.



A local family participates in a family art event to gather input for the park design.

Challenges, Obstacles, and Missteps

Our work is driven by the philosophy that knowledge and wisdom of place is local and that neighborhood residents are the experts when it comes to neighborhood improvements. For this reason, we strive to identify local leaders, connect them to resources, and help implement the community's visions for health and livability.

In South Wenatchee, we encountered several barriers in elevating community voices and nurturing grassroots leadership. For many in the community, immigration status and issues of racism

are deterrents to participation in civic events. Similarly, many of the community leaders we sought to engage had been previously engaged by the City of Wenatchee, only to see disappointing or no results. Our organization's outsider status in the neighborhood slowed the process of building trust and relationship.

Developed before we had strong local relationships, our timeline for community engagement was overly ambitious. Recognizing the misstep, we adapted our process to accommodate the neighborhood. We worked at a slower pace to create a solid foundation through strategic relationship-building, realistic expectations, and a commitment to integrity and results.

Our success is heavily contingent upon the participation and leadership of community members who in most cases have numerous personal, professional, and family priorities ahead of the park. As a standard practice, we attempt to compensate key community members for their participation. However, in South Wenatchee, issues of immigration status have also made it difficult to find feasible methods to compensate community members that are not eligible to work in the U.S.

"You build relationship first, and with it comes trust."

***Teresa Zepeda-Sosa,
Parque Padrino***

The lack of representation of local community members on the City Council, in the local philanthropic community, and on the City's park and art board have also presented obstacles for the project. We are often asked to reassure project partners and supporters that South Wenatchee community members have the desire and willingness to care for an investment in the neighborhood. Many presumptions from outsiders to the neighborhood are rooted in lack of cultural understanding and shared lived experience. In these cases, we have relied heavily on "insiders", such as Ruth Esparza, the only Latina city council person. We have received feedback that these lone voices cannot always serve as the only advocate for social equity for the

project. We believe that the work with Parque Padrinos can help change this dynamic. We will continue supporting local community members with resources to help them increase political and civic participation, to better and more equitably represent the neighborhood.

Hope for an Equitable Future

Rufus Woods, the former Publisher of the *Wenatchee World*, noted that “one of the fascinating aspects of the (South Wenatchee) story is that it demolishes the theory that people won’t get involved in civic affairs.” Teresa Zepeda-Sosa and Teresa Bendito—a mother and daughter from South Wenatchee—are two of the most engaged Padrinos. They embody the sense of community in South Wenatchee and are a source of inspiration for the park project. Their leadership is rooted in identity: as immigrants, as former farmworkers, and as active community leaders. They along with other Padrinos have ensured that the outreach and design process for Kiwanis Methow Park has built ownership, agency, and a stronger sense of belonging in South Wenatchee. Teresa and her daughter reflect a powerful sense of possibility for work that is genuinely community-based.

The renovation of Kiwanis Methow Park has set the stage for a new kind of engagement in South Wenatchee—inclusive, community-led, and ambitious. The efforts of these women and their family are

proof that personal engagement can build bridges that inspire people to step up and get involved. At the most recent community outreach event for the park, Bendito invited a neighbor to set up another voter registration booth during a family-art making event, and she’s working with a new partner from the local literacy council to combine forces later this summer.

Projects like these demonstrate the power of what happens when investment is collaborative and local experts are empowered. In response to a design workshop, Zepeda-Sosa said it best when she described the importance of the details and why they matter: “We Mexicans and Mexican-Americans feel a great joy when we see papel picado hanging up at a party. In my own heart, it stretches and fills up with an immense joy. During the time that one is chopping the tissue paper, it is the moment that one initiates the union among people—it’s where getting to know one another or the making of community, starts. This time is very special because this time is necessary to begin to live with one another.”



Teresa Zepeda-Sosa, Parque Padrino, at a recent community outreach event in Kiwanis Methow Park.