

Theme: Civic Engagement

Why is “civic engagement” a cross-chapter theme within this plan? Well, without civic engagement, we don’t really have a community. If we all just go about our own way without worrying about and assisting our fellow man, woman, or child, then we really don’t need this “community plan.” Civic engagement is key to creating community, developing trust, and moving forward. Without it, we can stop right now.

To address the theme of “civic engagement,” we asked each of the citizen-based planning committees to consider how their committee’s recommendations will increase the level and breadth of civic engagement within our community.

The Strategic Plan Coordinating Committee, when asked to measure the inter-relationships between “civic engagement” and the thirteen chapter topics, indicated the following (see Exhibit xx):

- Very strong relationship with Early Childhood Development and Economic Development chapters
- Medium-strong relationship with Arts/Culture/Tourism, Education & Workforce Development, Global Perspectives & Diversity, Natural Environment, Public Health, Public Safety, and Recreation & Leisure
- Moderate relationship with Growth Management & Land Use, Progressive Management, and Transportation
- Moderately Weak relationship with Housing

The “civic engagement” theme had more medium-strong and strong relationships with the thirteen chapter topics than any other theme. Does civic engagement have a greater impact on these topics? Is civic engagement impacted more by these topics? Possibly.

The very strong inter-relationship with early childhood development is not a surprise. Addressing an issue like early childhood development can only be successful as a community-wide effort. Government can’t do it. If we agree that early childhood development is a foundational key to the future of our community, then the community-at-large must take ownership of the issue and agree to accept the challenge en masse. Only civic engagement can trigger that type of community ownership. It must begin with a public awareness campaign so that our community learns the current situation and the incredible community payoff if we get this right. And one of the payoffs is that these children are more likely to become adults that will be civically engaged in their community.

To be successful with an early childhood development effort, the public education campaign must stress points that overcome the “don’t tell me how to raise my kids” attitude. The education campaign must stress not only the benefits to the child, the family and the community, but also that early childhood development does not equate to social engineering. Multiple research studies have proven what works; now we must

determine how best to implement those proven strategies in our community. Civic engagement throughout this process is a key to success. This is a wheel worth turning, even if we can only turn it slowly at first.

The strong linkage with economic development is, similarly, not unexpected. Studies show that children that receive quality early childhood development programs do better in school, achieve higher graduation rates, are more likely to go to college, and, thus, are more likely to become a highly skilled workforce. And a skilled workforce is one of the first things companies seeking to relocate evaluate in the communities they are considering. Additionally, the Economic Development chapter recommends the City annex surrounding developments in order to broaden the pool of civic-minded individuals who are eligible to serve on City boards and committees. (Many of the City's boards, committees, and commissions require that the individual live within the city limits.) The growth of the past decade or more has resulted in a number of large developments just beyond the city's current limits. Despite the cost of providing services to these additional areas, it is recommended that these annexations proceed in order to increase the civic engagement of those citizens who work, shop, and recreate in Springfield, but may live only 50-feet from the city limits.

The medium-strong relationships between civic engagement and many of the other chapters indicates we must apply attention to many pressure points. Civic engagement is enhanced when our citizens have pride in their community. Civic pride cannot be created without celebrating a community's rich past, present and future through museums, public art, festivals and events. Visual, literary and performing art can tell important stories of a community and has the power to engage citizens like no other sector.

The 2008 and 2010 Social Capital surveys both indicated a high correlation between education levels and civic engagement. They also indicated a high correlation between income and civic engagement. Thus, the better educated our citizens are and the greater income potential our citizens have, the more likely they are to be civic-minded.

The "inclusiveness" and "welcoming" tenets of the global perspectives and diversity chapter are obviously aligned with getting more citizens engaged in their Public initiatives and events focused on inclusiveness that welcome all to participate are necessary to creating a climate that promotes civic engagement.

The inter-relationship between civic engagement and the natural environment, public health, and transportation appears to be education of the community about the importance of both of these issues on our community's future. Sometimes the benefits of natural environment or public health initiatives are not readily apparent. And that education is going to both require civic engagement (to break through the static of everyone's daily lives long enough to tell the story of why these things are important and you should care) and, if successful, will certainly build greater civic engagement in our community. While transportation project benefits may be more visible, we must

increasingly attempt to engage the citizens via customer surveys, citizen surveys, open forums, and public report cards to help educate the community.

One of the most successful organizations in increasing civic engagement over the past few decades has been the Park Board. The Springfield-Greene County Park System currently engages over 235 groups and organizations throughout the system on a daily basis. Numerous volunteers are engaged in the Park Board programs, services, and support of park properties. The Park System's volunteers are fans – they are engaged and have ownership.

In the current political environment, government entities are not permitted to make a mistake. Any misstep results in the entity being heavily criticized and an increasingly uncivil populace. Government entities are considered guilty until proven innocent. As a result, many governmental entities tend to shy away from creative or experimental approaches to problem solving. The safest road is taken because of the fear of making a mistake resulting in public vilification. The City of Springfield is not going to shy away from creative or experimental strategies. Some may work; others will surely fail. The City's leaders will surely be publicly ridiculed for any failure. So be it. A new day demands new approaches. We won't throw out tried-and-true approaches just to change for change's sake. But we will look for ways to re-engineer what we do and how we do it. And we will also consider whether we need to keep doing it at all. This attitude will give government's critics much fodder; however, it's the right thing to do.

It's no secret that the development and implementation of this plan is intended to increase civic engagement. The development of the plan was citizen-led and citizens staffed all of the planning committees. Thousands and thousands of citizen volunteer hours have been invested in the development of this plan. However, unlike many plans, this plan is also asking the community to "adopt" a chapter or a theme and remain engaged for the next five-year implementation phase. We are not aware of any other community that has attempted this quite in this manner, and it's an experiment that may succeed or may flop . . . we'll see. But we do know that civic engagement is necessary to build community trust, and community trust is necessary for us to move forward to collectively address our challenges. Will we work together to create our own future? Or will we just cross our fingers, close our eyes, and hope it all just changes for the better on its own?