

Southwest Community Design Academy

La Plata County, Colorado

County Manager: Shawn Nau

Project Leader – Primary Contact

Julia Stantic

Planner, Planning Department

970.382.6261

stanticja@co.laplata.co.us

Presenting Team Member

Erick Aune

Director, Planning Department

970.382.6271

auneej@co.laplata.co.us

Presenting Team Member

Jason Meininger

Long Range Planner, Planning Department

970.382.6267

meiningerj@co.laplata.co.us

Making Magic: How Bold Can Government Be?

CASE ONE SYNOPSIS

The Southwest Community Design Academy (SWCDA) is a nine week interactive program brought to the community by the La Plata County Planning Department. The purpose of the program is to educate, motivate, and empower potential leaders and policy makers in the community through lectures by experts in the field and through the hands-on evaluation of a case study of a local development. Classes are held locally and are made up of local residents.

The anticipated, and in most cases achieved outcome of the Southwest Community Design Academy is more diversely educated community leaders, policy makers, and citizens who can critically think about community design issues, articulately express their ideas, and make significant contributions to the community. The cost of participation is \$150.00 and this includes light fare at each event, class materials and all needed text. Scholarships are available and the SWCDA asks that those who wish to apply will submit a one paragraph statement to the Planning Department explaining their need. Additionally, if a presenter wishes to attend the class, their tuition will be waived. Moreover, one can consider the cost saving this program offers by offering community members the chance to gain continuing education in a rural setting. The community saves by not losing residents to larger cities where the educational opportunities are more robust. Dollars stay in the community, the economy benefits, and the natural environment is spared by participants having less of a commute to gain education and network opportunities.

The Southwest Community Design Academy is an innovative new approach to service learning in La Plata County. It is unique in that it focuses on building partnerships and collaborating with local educational institutes while placing a large focus on public involvement. Through this program educating and empowering the community is the priority. The SWCDA is determined to reach new audiences, to bridge the gap of the voices not often heard with those which are, and to build the capacity of individuals who wish serve as community leaders. The nine week course is a specially developed program which is adjustable and can fit to our community's needs. The instructors are local leaders in their field who share their knowledge and experience with class participants. A real community property is used as a case study and allows students the opportunity to directly influence and contribute to the design of the project. Each year the obstacle of recruiting students and instructors arises, but through tried and true experience and the help of the community, our team successfully organizes this program. Each year we close registration at forty and we have nearly twenty instructors volunteer their time through out the nine week course. Researching a property and working with a property owner who wishes to be a case study has been a challenge each year as well. However, it has resulted in success for the program, the students and the property owner in the end.

The first two years of the program were spent in partnership with the San Juan Institute of Natural and Cultural Resources, an association of Fort Lewis College. This relationship had an unforeseen end when funding from Fort Lewis College was dissolved for this program. This taught the academy the

organizations it chooses to engage with, in support of the SWCDA, should be carefully considered in fiscal and affiliation terms, in an extremely critical manner. The Planning Department successfully brought the third year of the Southwest Community Design Academy to the community and looks forward to the opportunity to develop new and lasting relationships in the future.

PRESENTATION COMPONENTS

1. Innovation/Creativity

- **How did the program/project/service, etc. improve the organization?**

The Southwest Community Design Academy (SWCDA) does not reside on a precedence that we are here to teach for the sake of teaching. The SWCDA has improved La Plata County Government by growing informed citizens who make significant contributions to the community. The program takes the direct stance that its goal is to grow community leaders who can graduate from this program with a breadth of knowledge that will enable them to be empowered decision makers and community influences in the place we live, work, play and prosper. The Academy has allowed the organization to improve by offering an opportunity to expand its influence. The SWCDA has allowed La Plata County Government to not just be an organization based on meeting its citizen's needs, but it is now seen as an organization of learning; an organization that goes beyond the call of duty. The SWCDA allows government officials to come to their community as representatives and show them different perspectives for how they see and navigate through the world. Additionally, the SWCDA has increased the organizational excellence of La Plata County by succeeding the expectation of good customer service.

- **Were there new technologies used?**

The most powerful technology used was the capacity a design charrette can bring to a group of individuals. Through local examples, hands on activities, power point presentations and GIS mapping capabilities, students of the Academy were able to directly relate to the case study/property used for the design charrette through these advancing technologies. GIS mapping allowed participants of the class to have a series of maps which delineated the geography of the case study's property. We were able to show scenic view sheds on site, rivers, streams, wetlands, existing and proposed structures, locations of roads and ditches and the ability to geographically depict neighboring land uses was portrayed through GIS.

- **Was a private consultant used?**

A private consultant was not used. A partnership with the local college, Fort Lewis College was engaged to help buffer the line between a government educating and a government advocating. The partnership between the San Juan Institute of Natural and Cultural Resources (SJINCR) of Fort Lewis College allowed the gap of local government, (which does not have a Natural Resources Department) to be filled with an unbiased, educational component that is difficult to bridge without such a collaboration. The SJINCR was sponsored by Fort Lewis College and ran by Dr. Catherine Ortega. Dr. Ortega has a well respected local reputation and served as a Professor in the Biology

Department. Dr. Ortega developed and directed the institute until it was dissolved in 2010 due to funding restraints. Although the SJINCR was a critical component of the advancement of the SWCDA, La Plata County has began to reach out to other educational institutes that may add benefit to the mission of the Academy. In 2011, SWCDA is looking to join forces with another branch of Fort Lewis College, the Office of Community Services. The Office of Community Services provides outreach as a regional educational provider and assists local communities, students, and faculty to improve academic, social, economic, and ecological well being of the Four Corners region. This initiative will continue to seek creative and innovative ways to engage and collaborate with other organizations that can enhance the Southwest Community Design Academy.

2. Outcomes Achieved

- **What customer/community needs and expectations were identified and fulfilled?**

La Plata County is fortunate enough to have an abundance of non-profit agencies that help aide the community in its enhancements and services offered to citizens. Community members can often get lost in the opportunity and have struggled in finding an effort they truly feel they can be a part of to effectuate real change. The SWCDA was developed on the premise that the local government needs to not only grow and educate our citizens, but that it must empower people to stand up and take leadership roles in the fields or topics they have expertise and interests in. La Plata County has nearly 50 Boards with positions to be filled by the volunteering community. This SWCDA viewed this need as an opportunity and decided to help encourage and place Academy students in roles, boards, serving positions in efforts to bridge the identified need. This goal was achieved as several of the graduates from the SWCDA are acting Planning Commission members, participants on local sustainability boards, members of school boards, district representatives, organizers of local festivals, events and educational forums, etc.

- **Has service delivery been enhanced?**

The service delivery has indeed been enhanced as a direct result of the SWCDA. Community members are able to identify with one another as graduate after three successful years of the program. With nearly 100 graduates, and more to come, members of our community have come together in this highly interactive and professional learning environment and built long lasting networking relationships. Several of the participants in the SWCDA have played the unique role of being a presenter, in the topic of their expertise, while acting as a student in the program as well. Additionally, service delivery has been enhanced through the program by having participants who represent a specific sector. Such representatives are able to deliver their knowledge back to their affiliations and in turn educate a larger population of folks than the Academy could at any one time.

- **Did the initiative improve access to your government?**

The program has improved and increased access to our local government by building lasting and trusting relationships with County staff and the public. La Plata County is a politically divided County and by having representatives of its government bring unbiased and educational information to its citizens has proven to be incredibly important in the trust and respect its citizens have for their

government. It has also offered the community the opportunity to see its representatives are taking the time to listen and learn new perspectives. The SWCDA has been lead by three primary employees, housed in the Planning Department, and has given the community a face to connect with and a person they feel they can make direct contact with. It is not uncommon for graduates of the Academy to send information, events, news links, hot topic discussions, etc. to the SWCDA team and ask that they distribute the information to the class roster, past and present. Government employees have become more accessible to their constituents by offering them a venue in which their voices, expertise and concerns can be heard.

- **Has the health of the community improved as a result?**

The Planning Department felt the direct result of the effect the Academy was having on the community when a graduate of the SWCDA, a well reputable land use planning agent in La Plata County, submitted a conceptual development plan that clearly articulated Conservation Design Principals that had never been presented in their work before attending the Academy. This was a clear and measureable contribution to the community and it could be directly attributed to the influence of the SWCDA. The SWCDA has been approached by organizations that promote healthy lifestyles, local farmers and sustainability advocates who wish to use the SWCDA as a way to share their mission and help benefit the community.

3. Applicable Results and Real World Practicality

- **What practical applications could you share if selected?**

Through three years of successful implementation of the SWCDA, the staff has learned several valuable lessons in outreach, community participation, instructor recruitment, instructor compensation and continued leadership. Community relationships take years to build; by picking the right partner in a government's outreach, credibility can be enhanced and more attention to the mission of the program can occur when reputations are combined correctly. Through hands on experience we can help other governments understand how to not only recruit appropriate community leaders to teach specific course, but how to engage them, compensate them and show them thanks for their efforts in sharing their knowledge and taking time to spend with interested community members. Just as important as the instructors are to recruit, are the students of the program. The SWCDA has offered the program in the spring, summer and fall. Through tried and true experience, we can help government's understand the role weather and seasons, school districts, community events, etc. have on the success of this program. Additionally, the time courses are offered plays a direct role on who can attend and who can not. Closing the gap between the "usual suspects" of those community members who always attend public meetings, events, etc. can be bridged by tactics we have used to recruit the marginalized and less active members of our communities, (i.e. single moms, people in need of daycare, students, farmers/ranchers, those who work long hours). Through our experience we can also shed light on good catering ideas for the class, tuition costs, hand out materials and books, good locations to hold your meetings and how to get students registered and engaged in the process.

- **How applicable is the project/program/service to other local governments?**

If an interested government can answer yes to the following questions, it is more than likely to be a good candidate for such a program:

Does your community struggle with public participation?

Are you a rural community, with urban centers, faced with rapid growth projections?

Are your communities spread out?

Do you have a diverse community with differing political views and perspectives?

Is there a wealth of knowledge in your community that is not being shared?

Do you feel public efforts are being duplicated by various nonprofit agencies? Do you wish you could link efforts together in efforts to be more efficient and effective?

Rural communities across the nation are faced with rapid growth projections. More and more knowledge is being built and discovered every day. Any local government who is interested in growing their citizens and wishes to make the commitment to doing so would benefit from a program like the one La Plata County has developed. Local government professionals who are seeking opportunities to better organize their government and their constituents, those who wish to make lasting relationships and be involved in networking opportunities would find this program applicable, and most importantly, transferable to their communities.

- **What results/outcomes will you be able to share?**

Success and the opportunity to do excel are ongoing themes of the SWCDA. Through our experience we will be able to educate other local officials, staff, community members, on ways in which they can develop programs similar to ours that will suite the needs of their communities. This includes ways to keep members engaged, follow through on opportunities and ways to encourage people to stay or get involved with their community (through lists and recruitments of nonprofits and open boards).

- **Please include any performance measures if applicable.**

You can directly measure the success of your program by the number of individuals who stay active in their community after completion of the course. If graduates of your program participate in community discussions, volunteer on boards, create their own outlets of public participation, etc. than you can trace their patterns of behavior and measure it against the influence the program has had on their actions. Additionally, in our experience, graduates of the program have used the SWCDA has additional education to be used for credit and they have listed it as achievements on their job applications and resumes. If a government is experiencing an abundance of reference calls, based on the individual's participation in the SWCDA, a direct measurement of success can be derived. The performance of students in the class can also be measured by their attendance to the meetings as well as their participation. If a student is consistently showing up and participating in the class, you can measure their performance against those who may not be participating. Being a graduate of the SWCDA is not a title that is given to anyone who participates. Students take pride in receiving that certification and that is why we call them graduates!

4. Case Study Presentation

- **Briefly describe what your case study presentation might include.**

Our case study would provide participants the opportunity to see real life handouts of the curriculum used through out the past three year's of La Plata County's SWCDA. Handouts used would allow participants to understand how the program can be divided out in to topics and sections. A power point presentation would provide participants with visuals to help them conceptualize what the classroom looks like and how students and instructors are congregated in a shared space. Lastly, an example design charrette would be used to demonstrate how nine week's worth of information can be brought together to help students of the program exercise their knowledge and help design something real in their community.