



Leaders at the Core of Better Communities

2011 Annual Awards Program

Program Excellence Awards Nomination Form

Deadline for Nominations: March 11, 2011

Complete this form (sections 1 and 2) and submit with your descriptive narrative.

SECTION 1: Information About the Nominated Program

Program Excellence Award Category (*select only one*):

- Community Health and Safety
- Community Partnership
- Community Sustainability
- Strategic Leadership and Governance

Name of program being nominated: Chapel View Screen Wall Project

Jurisdiction(s) where program originated: City of Farmers Branch, Texas

Jurisdiction population(s): 31,110

Please indicate the month and year in which the program you are nominating was fully implemented. (Note: All Program Excellence Award nominations must have been fully implemented by or before January 31, 2010, to be eligible. The start date should not include the initial planning phase.)

Month: November Year: 2008

Name(s) and title(s) of individual(s) who should receive recognition for this award at the ICMA Annual Conference in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, September 2011. (Each individual listed MUST be an ICMA member to be recognized.):

Name: Gary D. Greer

Title: City Manager Jurisdiction: City of Farmers Branch

Name: _____

Title: _____ Jurisdiction: _____

Name: _____

Title: _____ Jurisdiction: _____

SECTION 2: Information About the Nominator/Primary Contact

Name of contact: Gary D. Greer

Title: City Manager Jurisdiction: City of Farmers Branch

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ICMA Program Excellence Awards Nomination Community Partnership Award

Chapel View Screen Wall Project City of Farmers Branch, Texas



City Description

The City of Farmers Branch, Texas is a 12.1 square mile first-ring suburb of Dallas bordered on three sides by highways and/tollroads. Along the city's eastern and western borders are commercial buildings, warehouses, and office towers, which bring approximately 65,000 workers into the city each day. The residential population of approximately 31,100 is concentrated in the city's core between the two commercial areas. Eighty-five percent of the city's housing stock was constructed before 1970 and neighborhood revitalization and redevelopment have been prime objectives of the City Council for the last ten to fifteen years.

Project Background

The Chapel View screen wall surrounds a residential neighborhood called Chapel View, which has 116 parcels, which were build between 1960 and 1979. Seventeen of the parcels owned and were responsible for portions of the community wall. The original wall was estimated to be constructed during that time period as well. The neighborhood is located within walking distance of the Four Corners, which is what was originally considered the "downtown" area of Farmers Branch. Much of the pedestrian and vehicular traffic traveling through Farmers Branch passes through this major intersection that has aging retail strip centers on almost all four corners. The Four Corners area is a major focus of redevelopment and the City is actively working to create a new, vibrant town center from the aging and in some cases, poorly occupied retail space.

While the wall has been in a state of disrepair for many years, the City Council took the lead in identifying the Chapel View wall as unsafe and visually detrimental to the area and detracted from the positive strides that were being made in the redevelopment efforts. The wall was made of pre-fabricated 6' concrete panels held together by rusted steel brackets. From a structural standpoint, various sections of the wall were leaning severely, in danger of collapsing, or severely disjointed. Visually, the wall was unevenly painted or not painted at all in sections that had patch-work repair completed in the past. At least one resident had resorted to reinforcing the wall with steel bars in the ground to prevent it from collapsing into his backyard. The City's code enforcement division began issuing code notices to homeowners along the wall because the condition of the wall was so deteriorated that it was no longer code compliant.



Previous efforts to address the condition of the wall had not been successful for several reasons. First, the cost was prohibitive for most individual homeowners to repair their section of wall. Many homeowners that have property abutting the wall had constructed other fencing inside of the wall and didn't want to invest additional monies to repair the wall they couldn't see from their backyard. Second, should an individual homeowner repair his section of wall, the improvements may be for naught since there was nothing to induce the neighboring homeowners to do the same. Additionally, no property owners association existed to spread



out repair costs. In many sections where the wall was leaning against trees, bushes, or utility poles, repairing only one panel of the wall was not feasible because it would be brought down by the adjacent unrepaired panels. Second, the neighborhood was not united in attacking the problem together. The idea of some sort of assessment for the property owners had been discussed previously but never gained much traction. Interior homeowners did not want to pay any money to fund what was viewed as an amenity for the homeowners along the wall. Finally, given the estimated cost to repair or replace

the entire wall given that individual repairs were not effective, the homeowners asked the City to assist them. With guidance from the City Attorney it was determined that the wall itself was not on city-owned property and thus was not a project eligible for funding with taxpayer dollars. This final opinion left the homeowners with no viable options for repair and left the community with a prominent eyesore in the central part of town. In many communities, this would have been the end of the conversation. However, the Council believed this project to be beneficial to the community as a whole and a determined and engaging project manager brought the project back from the dead, generated consensus among opposing groups of homeowners, and improved the community with the construction of a new screen wall.

Progress Forward: Democracy in Action

In the summer of 2008, discussions about the condition of the wall came to a head when many of the homeowners abutting the wall began receiving code notices for the condition of the wall. These homeowners lobbied the Council and Council agreed that something must be done to improve the condition of the wall. At the time, the only point of agreement among the Chapel View homeowners was that the wall needed replacement. City administration was directed to find a solution to the problem.

The first thing that was done was delay any enforcement on the code notices until resolution to the issue was identified. Immediately, this action helped to defuse much of the frustration associated with the issue of the wall. The project manager put democracy to work and initiated the first of three neighborhood meetings in November 2008. Every homeowner in the neighborhood received note card invitations for every meeting held and the attendance was reflective of those efforts. At each of the three meetings, the average attendance was well above 40 residents and approximately thirty percent of the homes were represented. Each meeting began with a set of specific objectives that were on the table for discussion and

deliberation by the neighbors. For the first meeting, the project manager outlined the City objectives for the project - uniformity, appearance, and safety – and discussed a plan of action to move forward, which included replacement options and funding long term maintenance. Five replacement options were identified and discussed with the homeowners. Homeowners openly discussed the pros and cons of each option and suggested other options for consideration until there were a total of eight potential options for replacing the wall. Additionally, the various ways to finance the long term maintenance of the wall was discussed. The merits of creating a neighborhood-wide public improvement district (PID) that would fund the construction of the wall and a homeowners’ association (HOA), which would fund long-term maintenance, were also debated. The second meeting included a discussion of how much each property would be assessed for the construction of the wall and what types of legal documentation would be required. The final meeting provided homeowners an opportunity to choose the finish out paint for the wall and the neighborhood sign design.

At the conclusion of each discussion, options that were discussed were voted on by those present, which never ceased to surprise some homeowners who were not expecting the decision-making process to be as efficient and inclusive as it was. The approach to place the homeowners in control of the decision-making process was a critical part of the project’s success. Homeowners voted on every critical aspect of the project—whether to replace or tear down the wall, what type of wall to construct, how tall, what color, stone patterns, signage, and how the assessments were determined.

Scope, Importance, and Value of Activity/Contribution

The replacement of the Chapel View screen wall has positively impacted not just the Chapel View neighborhood but all of the residents living near the wall and those that drive past the wall each day. Since the completion of construction, the city has received numerous emails with positive feedback from residents, many of whom do not even reside within Chapel View. The Chapel View neighborhood has a great vibe about it now. Improved quality of life, which is one of those intangible benefits that all cities strive to provide for residents, is something that these residents feel when they drive into their neighborhood. The residents are energized and they are now one of the most active and well-organized neighborhoods in the city. The neighborhood held a “Hot Dogs and Hard Hats” neighborhood party to celebrate the new wall and invited the project manager and the City Council. The new wall may also prove to be a catalyst for revitalization of the homes within the neighborhood and in the surrounding neighborhoods. Pride in ownership and feeling that your neighborhood is an important part of the community are factors that impact homeowner perceptions about their biggest investment.



Effectiveness Measures

The approach taken for this project can be replicated in any community. While the construction of the wall is certainly not a project or program that improves efficiency in city operations, it is a great example of how creative thinking and openness can provide residents with a

governmental entity that responds to their needs. The project was not undertaken to save the city money, but was considered because of the value it would add to the community.

Quality and Creativity

The leadership shown by both the project manager and the neighborhood champions made this project possible. The assignment of the Finance Director as the project manager was the first signal that the city was taking a fresh approach to an old issue. Typically, a project like this would have been headed by an engineer. However, by taking a more innovative approach to assigning a project manager, much of the contentious history regarding previous wall discussions was removed and everyone was able to start with a clean slate.

The leadership and expertise demonstrated by the project manager in guiding the discussion of the PID through the neighborhood group was instrumental in making sure everyone understood how the PID worked, how the assessments were determined, what the lien on their home really means, and what the terms of the repayment period were. These are important details that determine whether an individual homeowner wants to participate or not. If the project manager was unable to confidently explain the technical details of the PID to homeowners, it would have deterred many from participating and may have jeopardized the entire project. To date, forty-seven of the 116 homeowners have completely paid off their wall assessment, which has far greater than what was anticipated at this point. This speaks to the level of satisfaction those homeowners have with the finished product and in some sense, with the process itself, where they felt empowered by knowing the facts.

Other Factors: Community Engagement, Positive Feedback from Constituents, Overcoming Barriers, and Partnerships

The Chapel View wall project is the definition of partnerships, positive feedback from constituents, overcoming barriers, and community engagement. Many cities give lip-service to partnerships with various community groups but the Chapel View wall project truly was a partnership between the city and the neighborhood. Each party brought something to the table to make the project a success. The city pledged \$75,000 towards the cost of the wall construction if the homeowners agreed to:

1. Grant the city temporary construction easements; and
2. Create a HOA among wall owners to fund future maintenance on the wall; and
3. Create a neighborhood-wide PID, which would pay for the remainder of the wall construction cost.

In addition to assisting in the funding of the project, whose total construction was approximately \$185,000, the city handled all necessary documentation required for the creation of the PID, which would make the project affordable for everyone. The city's legal counsel provided the necessary legal documents for the easement dedication and the PID creation, as well as providing proper legal guidance that allowed the city to construct the wall within the law. City construction inspectors ensured that the installation was done correctly and in accordance with the construction plans. The City's Public Works Department worked

with the project manager to coordinate street repairs in front of the wall to correct drainage problems and the Parks Department assisted in landscaping the area in front of the wall. The neighborhood champions made sure that there was enough support within the neighborhood (at least 50% of the homes) to create and approve the PID and worked to “sell” neighbors on the idea of the assessment.

The decision-making process and level of community engagement worked hand-in-hand to overcome barriers that had prevented the wall from being addressed in the past. As any public administrator knows, engaging the public to participate in meaningful ways in government is a constant challenge. Many times, the public is spurred into action to combat community leaders. Participation in the screen wall project was a great example of residents participating to cooperate with community leaders to better the community. Because all of the stakeholders in the process- the city, the wall owners, and the interior lot owners- recognized that the wall had to be addressed, they were able to build upon that consensus to create a common point of reference to discuss options for the wall. The primary barrier in the past had been affordability of the repairs. When the option to tear down the wall and replace it with shrubs was discussed as a viable option, interior homeowners realized that they *did* place a value on having the wall define their neighborhood and from there, they were willing to listen to the option of paying an annual assessment to help fund the construction of a new wall. When the project manager demonstrated that he was willing to entertain all suggestions as viable options and not immediately reject them, homeowners were able to identify aspects of the project that had not been discussed before.

During the preliminary discussions the project manager had discussions with the city’s legal counsel regarding the issue of expenditure of public money for a private improvement, legal counsel correctly identified an important aspect of the project that had not been considered before as well. The screen wall, while technically located on private property, was essentially a public amenity and benefitted the public by adding value to the community. The feedback from Chapel View residents has been overwhelmingly positive, which is to be expected. However, what has been unexpected is the outpouring of emails and letters from residents outside the neighborhood that’s been received by both the Council and the project manager thanking them for removing the eyesore that was the old wall. The project manager has received several calls from other neighborhoods asking the city to assist them with a similar project. As the city’s legal counsel had predicted, the value of the wall is recognized by those even outside the neighborhood.

Conclusion

The Community Partnership Award emphasizes successful multi-participant involvement between a local government and individuals to improve the quality of life for residents. The Chapel View screen wall project is a perfect illustration of innovative partnering with a diverse group of residents to enhance their quality of life. The screen wall is now a source of pride for the neighborhood and a beautification enhancement for the entire community.