

Creating a New Narrative for The Center of Anna Maria

Background

The Black Isle Group was originally contacted to conduct an operational review of The Center. The review started with an assessment of local articles which cast a shadow over the operation, its financial transparency/viability and its management team. After a non-disclosure document was signed the review consisted of but was not limited to the following:

- A study of The Center's financial statements for the past five years
- A review of the programming and participation rates (usage)
- Understanding of all communications, including The Center website
- An update on recent articles written about The Center by local press
- A lengthy interview with Kristen Lessig, The Center's Executive Director
- Competitive study of other successful community centers
- An understanding of the "non-profit" status of The Center

Conclusion

The conclusions drawn from the preliminary review were as follows:

- It is clear that civic leaders do not understand that the center is a non-profit. The local leaders are calling for the Center to cut costs which can only be done by eliminating programs that are supporting all members of the community, in opposition to the mission of the community center.
- The Center is delivering services that are meeting the needs of many families and individuals and can be seen by the continued usage by members of the community of all ages across multiple programs.
- After analysis of the financials it is clear that improving revenues from programming will not cover the financial shortfall. To remain viable the center 501C must increase donations, grants and contributions from the townships which are using the center. The board needs to play a greater role in fundraising, driving more donations into the center.
- The Center is suffering from a lack of public trust, perpetuated by rumors and lack of understanding of the complexities of The Center and its not for profit designation. The center has always relied on the generosity of the community and philanthropic donor, civic contributions and grants. The confusion tends to center on the completion of the new building and its larger debt burden and overhead. Unfortunately the expansion coincided with the beginning of the last recession in 2008.
- The new construction created more space which is not being efficiently utilized but there are opportunities (small commercial kitchen).

- The center is clearly under financial stress. Some of the current options (bringing in a third vendor for physical fitness) may not be in the best interest of the long term viability of the center. While short-term gains may be evident, it is unclear how that decision could affect the long term outlook of the institution.
- Kristen Lessig, was found to be competent, dedicated and knowledgeable. In this small town she is still viewed as an outsider to the island community. She has made numerous improvements to The Center over her tenure while battling unfriendly press and misperceptions, which is distracting.

Recommendations

The recommendation was made to undertake a strategic planning process for the main purpose of helping to change the conversation about The Center; to change the narrative so potential donors see and hear the positive and move away from negativity surrounding the institution. The strategic planning process would involve members of staff, board members, civic leaders, prominent donors and partners. The Center needed an actionable sense of direction that would embrace the needs of the entire community; a plan that would allow for more pertinent decisions and consider the highest and best use of the entire facility.

This recommendation was acknowledged and approved. The planning process commenced.

The Strategic Planning Process – Not just another SWOT

The scope of the work included a traditional approach to non-profit strategic planning. We chose diverse participants that would represent various interested parties in the community and would be open to a conversational dialog. This was not a corporate or typical consulting exercise. This was a conversation among stakeholders on how to change the narrative and perceptions of The Center.

Based on the various schedules and time availability the on-site work was conducted over a three day span – starting on Friday afternoon, October 6th, all day Saturday, October 7, finishing up on Monday morning, October 9th.

In attendance:

Kristen Lessig, Executive Director
Chris Culhane, Operations Director
Amy Talucci, Director, First Impressions
Aris Thompson, Communications Manager
Lindsay Sauls, Events Coordinator
David Zaccagnino, Board Chair
Mike Thrasher, Board Member
Carol Carter, civic representative, City Commissioner, the City of Anna Maria
Barbara Sato, donor and project sponsor

Aidan McAvinchey, Facilitator, The Black Isle Group
Sally Geaney, Facilitator

The role of the facilitator was to encourage the creative and respectful conversation where everyone's input matters. Building consensus through shared ideas and gaining

Objectives of Planning Session

1. Change the story, narrative, conversation
2. Agree on a clear vision and Mission for The Center
3. Have a better understanding of who the stakeholders are and what they want to see in a community center
4. Explore a five to ten year plan for The Center based on these discussions
5. Develop a communications plan to convey the new narrative and plan
6. As an extension, create a short term development plan, six months to a year, driven by the new narrative.
7. Lay framework for an implementation/action plan

After introductions the first question of the planning session was:

What does a "community center" mean to you? What are the elements you would expect in a community center in general?

This question sparked an energetic and lively conversation. A long list of attributes was created. These attributes became the basis on the weekend conversation and resonated well with the entire team.

Main themes of the conversations:

- The importance of the history of the "Community Center" on Anna Maria and how the center has evolved over time.
- The changing demographics of the Island and how those changes effected attitudes of residents toward the transient population and The Center itself
- The idea that it cannot be all things to everyone. BUT, it did need to consider the full-time, year round, local residents, who for the most part have a malevolent perception of The Center.
- Honest and enlightening conversation about the misperceptions of The Center financials, its operations and its management, including the compensation of these dedicated to make The Center successful.
- Breakdown of the current programs and the participation in those programs.
- The misperception by the community that The Center is funded by tax payer money. While small grants are given, the bulk of the funding after participant revenue comes from private donations and fundraising activities. The high overhead of the building, built in 2008, relates directly to the operational shortfall and the amount needed from donations.
- The Center is a not-for-profit institution and has always relied on the support of philanthropic donations and civic contributions. This is not new. The change in

demographics, the economy and altered attitudes in all circles have led to a drop in charitable contributions.

- The opportunity to turn negative to positive. To embrace the needs of the various target segments on the island for the facilities of The Center and design a plan to cater to those specific needs.

A discussion about the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats brought about lengthy lists in all areas. Cross-referencing the top five ideas in each area was the basis of a new story. This was a hard exercise as it forced the group to have to rank elements in each category and again led to a lively conversation.

Despite some glaring and obvious strategic directions coming from this exercise the group were hesitant to identify them. This is perhaps due to the operational team's diminished confidence in themselves and their inability to see past the day-to-day struggles. Once vocalized, the group became reenergized and fully embraced the possibilities

Based on the conversation a number of Strategic Imperatives were identified.

Restructure the Board – While there are some fully committed and dedicated members on the board currently it was identified that the Board needed to be re-energized. The Board needs to be filled out with the addition of members who fully understand their roles from an oversight perspective and their financial commitments. A development plans is to be initiated with the desired goal of raising enough money to build up the endowment, create an operation float to cover seasonality of operations and the annual operating shortfall due to the high overhead.

A Center of Wellness and Wellbeing – Explore the idea of creating a community center that is focused on the wellness and well-being of the entire community. With a focus on the one third of the overall population (the year-round retirees), create programs that allow them to see The Center as a place to go for your overall health. Partner with hospitals to provide residents, through The Center, mobile health screenings, nutrition, cooking classes, and as well as appropriate exercise programing. As an extension of the "Community Gathering Place" coordinate a weekly farmers market, this would draw people to The Center for fresh, wholesome, local products. (This would also facilitate the re-design of The Center façade to make it more inviting).

Anchor Events - Establish a number of events (3, but no more than 4), which bring the community together at the same time each year. This recreates a sense of reliability, dependability and something that members of the community of all ages can look forward to.

Communications Plan - Develop a comprehensive communications plan that covers all aspects of The Center's activities, which is strategic and targeted to the various segments of the community. The plan should also incorporate a two-way communications system, seeking input and ideas from the community for THEIR community center.

Re-evaluate the Vision and Mission – As a consequence of the work conducted realign the vision and mission of The Center to more appropriately provide direction and clarity.

Implementation

While the group worked hard to identify opportunities to build a new narrative and direction for The Center the real work begins now. A framework was created to realistically breakdown the Strategic Imperatives into manageable initiatives. Each initiative is a means to an end. Completion dates and key personnel assigned for the initiative execution are built into the framework. All initiatives across all Strategic imperatives are coordinated to avoid road blocks and redundancy of effort.

Success can only be achieved if all parties associated with The Center do their part to create and live the new story.