

## Communities Unlimited

### USDA Rural Development - Rural Placemaking Innovation Challenge

#### INNOVATIVE PLACEMAKING TO CREATE QUALITY OF LIFE IN 5 RURAL COMMUNITIES IN TEXAS

Oct. 1, 2021 – September 30, 2023

#### FINAL REPORT

USDA funded the majority of this innovative effort along with significant contributions of two deeply rooted local philanthropic partners, identified and coordinated by Communities Unlimited.

Communities Unlimited is a long-standing partner of USDA Rural Development serving many of our smallest and most rural communities throughout seven US Southern states.

#### **CU's Approach to our work:**

*Through human connection and ingenuity combined with cutting-edge technology and expertise, we connect people to solutions that sustain healthy businesses, healthy communities, and healthy lives.*

For more on CU see: <https://communitiesu.org/annual-report-2023/>

#### **What was expected to happen?**

CU prepared the application in early 2021 to USDA RD to work with five rural Texas communities ranging in population from 681 to 5,869, poverty rates ranging from 15 to 24%, and with significant minority populations. Four of five communities documented a decline in number establishments 204-18.

The plan and to develop four local diverse community leadership teams (combining Martindale and Luling), develop a local placemaking plan with each community listening to local priorities, and also to address four areas:

- 1) Enhance broadband access
- 2) Convert vacant and abandoned properties, possibly to pocket parks and community gardens
- 3) Create recreational spaces
- 4) Support small businesses that enhance quality of life

#### **What actually occurred?**

One challenge of incremental grant funding of program delivery is simply how and when to scale-up good service delivery. At the time of the RPIC Award in Sep. 2021, CU's Community Sustainability Team needed to increase capacity in this region and made extensive efforts for some time to hire a well-qualified Community Facilitator, initially aiming for a central Bryan/College Station area or more broadly in between the four Central Texas communities and San Augustine in Deep East Texas. Hiring was challenging in this post COVID time. After brief delay, CU was able to reallocate an existing staff from another program area but with relevant experience to support the RPIC implementation.

The original application suggested CU would combine work in the Martindale (pop. 1231) and Luling (pop. 5869) communities in Caldwell County, for a total of four community leadership teams. Upon

engagement with the communities, CU staff determined that community participation would be stronger with separate community specific teams.

Creation of **diverse, inclusive community leadership teams** who are not only the “usual suspects” and not only elected officials or staff is a non-negotiable for CU in our Community Sustainability work. That said, it is not easy to form quickly, and for this staff that was a part of the learning curve. This is important because it brings greater talents, perspectives and engagement; but also critically because it builds networks and relationships across economic, ethnic, age and social groups to create new local paths for success, employment, and entrepreneurial and capital connections. In a sense, this part of the work in a sense, is both the path and destination.

### **McDade community**

In reflection, the three strongest leadership teams in this situation were the more mid-sized communities. The smallest McDade community in Bastrop County is unincorporated and so outreach was made through both the McDade Independent School District superintendent and board meeting presentations, and the local McDade Historical Society. Much local energy during the timing was focused on some critical school bond elections, that were fully defeated in the first round; and then later partially approved. At the time, the new Community Facilitator slowed implementation to allow completion of that first bond election. My recommendation now is to not wait and to engage in parallel. There is no perfect timing. McDade also has a successful annual Watermelon Festival each summer with a separate sponsoring organization, but along with School Board and the Historical Society and several churches, many prime volunteers are already engaged. Pivots in McDade work: Through connections with the local Bastrop County Cares group, CU was connected to Bastrop County Commissioners about a severe wastewater need in another part of the county, and facilitated submission of final phase of a first-time wastewater service project for CWSRF funding. CU RPIC staff were also invited into the Bastrop Broadband Task Force, highlighted information from both the ISD Superintendent and IT staff with awareness of students in rural areas with remaining inadequate internet access even post-COVID and despite mobile hot-spot distribution. In ongoing work following completion of RPIC, CU is actively supporting the Bastrop Broadband Task Force, and an internet provider in that area is engaged in accessing an additional tower location to greatly enhance high quality fixed-wireless access in that rural part of the county. At a county level, this work is ongoing with other CU support beyond completion of RPIC, to ensure less served residents are able to take advantage of strategic opportunities through NTIA BEAD funds, or possibly USDA ReConnect or Distance Learning and Telemedicine programs, and Digital Skills and Literacy programs.



An early Bastrop County Broadband Task Force meeting

## **Luling Community**

The City of Luling as the largest community was also somewhat challenging, in that they are actually quite successful and active in several areas of “placemaking,” so the question is more how to augment that work in way deeply serving to the community. Due to size of Luling, the community facilitator chose to implement the RPIC work with community engagement and outreach through three key partners: the local Economic Development Corporation director, the local Mainstreet Program director, and the separate Chamber of Commerce director, rather than an open invitation to a broad community meeting. These three did an excellent job recruiting a diverse group for the community leadership team who are essentially a next generation of leaders—not yet on boards, etc. One challenge is that this sponsorship/partnership in the work led to several occasions where the busy key partners asked if we might delay a CLT meeting, with an extensive schedule of local festivals, Mainstreet and economic development booster events. In hindsight, CU facilitator would advocate more strongly to keep an original meeting schedule to keep momentum of the group trust-building and effort toward new work. CU developed strong partnership with the local Caldwell County Community Services Foundation, that works to strengthen local non-profits and does some local grant making and encouraged participation in their grant writing workshops. CU referred several local businesses to the CU Entrepreneurship team. One of the most exciting referrals was actually a participant on the local community leadership team, who had moved away but returned home and realized the absence of social places for people to gather in the evenings, or after school sporting events. While there are several restaurants, many close by evening. They identified a historic rail switching site adjacent to Highway 90 (a main thorough-fare slowing through town) and later a drive-in but long closed. They are working to open a venue for multiple food-truck vendors, with a safe place also for community and families to gather on evenings and in weekends. This local entrepreneur engaged with CU’s Entrepreneurship Team for no-cost consulting around their business plan. During the course of this project, the city continued long-standing city festivals such as the “Watermelon Thump,” Downtown Holiday Stroll, Night in Old Luling and others. The city location at intersection of US I-10 and US Hwy 183 is well located for access to the Austin and San Antonio metro areas, and national transportation routes. During the project, the city gained a high-tech defense contractor, a local meat processing market, and several other small businesses in the Main Street area.



## **What went well, and why?**

With each community leadership team, CU used the Wealth Works model (an Asset Based community development model) to consider eight categories of local assets (wealth) such as Natural, Social, Cultural and others. CU would definitely encourage use of strengths/asset based approach as it helps find







**Park river access to be improved.**



**Texas Water Safari passing Martindale - same location.**

The Martindale Library (a non-profit) adjacent and only partially supported by the city had completed good work during COVID to prepare for a Digital Navigator program. CU Facilitator connected the library volunteer grant writer and founder who started that project with CU's Broadband Area Director and there are hopes for future collaboration as state and national opportunities for Digital Skills and Literacy training develop during 2024-25.

### **Wortham works on multiple areas: Community Clean Up, Tourism, and Preparing for Housing**

The Wortham community is 45 minutes east of Waco, and 8 miles north of Mexia in a more northerly part of central Texas. The Wortham Community Leadership Team had the strong start with a VFD meeting room filled with 19 participants at the first meeting, and it evolved several times over the course of the project. The team explored several areas and worked to implement several activities over the RPIC project. Two volunteers connected through the RPIC work to establish a **"Keep Wortham Beautiful"** associated with Keep Texas Beautiful and Keep America Beautiful and to begin regular community clean-ups. A **Wortham Heritage Tourism** team shared ideas with the CLT and was encouraged to proceed with creating several metal fabricated cut-outs of Blues Musicians starting with Blind Lemon Jefferson, originally from Wortham area and reason for the annual Wortham Blues Festival. These effort near the old brick main street in downtown, also led to a **Mural Project** where members of the team identified and contacted regional muralists and chose to allocate the Seed Grant project to downtown mural, now hoped to be the first of several. From the first meetings, both the Mayor and High School Principal identified a need for more local housing, and that newly hired teachers usually had to commute from nearby towns. One team member contacted a home developer to tour a tract of 10 acres owned by the city, and on that tour said he realized a hope that his community could look better to first-time visitors. Several on the team inventoried vacant and abandoned properties in the city. In the later months of the RPIC project, this evolved to a **Code Enforcement Task Force** include CLT Members, council members, and the police chief concerned to implement considerate but more fair and uniform implementation of the city's property ordinances. The city hired an experienced part-time code enforcement officer from neighboring Corsicana and view these efforts to clean up town and

vacant lots, as a preparation step toward possible in-fill housing development. The CU Housing Program Director also worked with the team to prepare a local housing pre-assessment survey to prepare for future work. CU also worked on Broadband Access facilitating meetings with local Fixed Wireless Providers, and community training about state and federal programs to improve service. Some of this work is ongoing beyond RPIC.



### **San Augustine Parks Updates and Local Business Support**

The City of San Augustine is about four hours further east of most of the other RPIC communities on the historic El Camino Real. The community leadership team formed with a diverse core of real community champions. CU Facilitator in hindsight realizes that many of these “super volunteers” and community champions are serving usually on multiple volunteer groups or committees, and we could have encouraged this as an opportunity to work harder to bring on a new generation of volunteers. The community leadership team gave strong discussion on many areas for possible work but selected a main project of updating some of the existing park spaces. A 1978 created tennis and basketball park was mostly out of use with no nets and broken lights. The group decided to clean up and renew the tennis court, converting one to a pickle ball court and to update the basketball hoops with new paint and nets. This smaller project was hoped to augment an ongoing city/county project one block away completing a small park with a playground and walking trail. One parent on the CLT noted that the basketball and pickleball courts would be a great destination for older children, while younger children were supervised by parents at the playground. Future projects to follow are hoped to update the 1980s era baseball fields, complete minor repairs to the boardwalk behind the log cabin and put a new coat of paint on the BNSF Caboose owned by the city at that central park with trail out to the historic Mission Dolores. During the course of the grant, these volunteers separately completed advocacy resulting in funding by the Texas Legislature for a historic reconstruction to be completed at Mission site. During this work in the TLL Temple region in East Texas, CU also separately hired a Lending Officer and an Entrepreneurship Team Management Consultant that were referred to several small businesses and met several times with the local Chamber of Commerce. Small businesses are challenging and some restaurants really struggled with increasing food costs during this time. CU also advised local businesses of the USDA REAP Loans and Grants due to discussion of high local energy costs. Two businesses completed SAM.gov registration, and still hopes to complete the full REAP Application that may help with high restaurant utility costs. Currently CU has followed the RPIC work with a long-term Community Resource Manager model to support connecting many local non-profits and groups to resources.



CU Agua4All Grant - water fountain bottle-fillers added for San Augustine ISD HS, MS and Elementary



San Augustine Parks Clean Up day.

### What can be improved, and how?

The most challenging parts of this project really included the stretch for one staff to deliver multiple services and areas of programmatic research and conversation across this number of communities. If using a similar model, working with 3-4 communities and a lesser travel radius could allow more consistent “in community” contact and work across all the communities. Another challenge is to balance being sensitive and flexible to community priorities and demands on volunteer time, yet to also maintain consistent project delivery and schedule to build confidence and trust in community work that is new and unknown to most of the participants. While still being sensitive to the community, it is important to advocate for the importance of maintaining adequate regular structure.

### Advice to other organizations planning to similar projects:

- A diverse and inclusive community leadership or visioning team is a must.
- These principles from the WealthWorks model are good for consideration even if using other models for organizing and community work. We returned to these several times with each Community Leadership Team:

### **CS & WealthWorks Principles**



#1 – **Create wealth**, broadly defined, and aspire to do no harm.

#2 – Root wealth in local people, places and firms through **local ownership, control and influence.**



#3 – Build **lasting livelihoods** by intentionally including people and firms on the economic margins.