

Small Budget – Merit: Sonoran Institute



Twenty years of working with communities to advance conservation and smart growth has taught us that success is not random. It relies on effective local leadership and community capacity. The Community Development Academy (CDA) training program helps local leaders develop the skills and knowledge to assess challenges and opportunities, weigh options, guide the community through challenging issues, and make sound decisions for the future.

Community Development Academies are built around the idea that progress requires collaboration and partnerships. Too often, individuals return from a training or conference with ideas and energy, but nowhere to take them due to lack of support and political realities. Progress at the local level almost always results from several people working together based on a shared awareness of the challenges and potential solutions. CDAs support shared knowledge by collectively engaging a diverse group of local leaders, and helping to break down barriers by opening new doors for cooperation and common sense solutions.

A CDA builds skills and leadership for a group of twenty local leaders in a specific community or county. Over a series of 8-10 weekly seminars, participants learn about and discuss specific planning and development issues facing their community or region. In addition to exploring relevant topics, these trainings develop individual and group leadership skills to help make participants and the organizations or jurisdictions they represent more effective. This leadership and capacity-building element is what facilitates lasting change. Engaging a diverse group of local leaders promotes shared understanding and supports coordination and cooperation between different entities.

We have used CDAs in Garfield County, Colorado with great success and going forward, will be using the model to do trainings in other parts of Western Colorado. The CDAs in Garfield County and the City of Rifle focused on linking

community planning and economic development. Weekly sessions covered topics such as community design, economic development, transportation, infill and redevelopment, regional coordination, market and demographic trends, and local leadership. Twenty-five local leaders were accepted to participate in the Garfield County CDA, including a county commissioner, town managers, planners and planning commissioners from Garfield County; the Mayors of Glenwood Springs and Parachute; council members from Glenwood Springs, Rifle and New Castle; private sector architects and developers, and non-profit community leaders. For the City of Rifle's CDA, 18 local leaders participated, including downtown business owners, a city council member, a planning commissioner, and several Rifle residents interested in sustainable development in Rifle.

Participants from each course gave it high ranks in evaluations and found networking and dialogue with other local officials and leaders to be among the most valuable aspects. Others enjoyed the informed discussion with "trainers" (invited experts for each topic). Almost every week, a sizable group stayed late to continue discussion after the official session ended at 8PM, which spoke to the energy and level of interest in the CDA. A highlight of the Garfield County course was seeing a diverse group of community leaders from across the County discuss ways to work together to tackle some of the region's key planning and development challenges. The City of Rifle's CDA was so successful that several of the graduates formed a citizen action group that volunteered to host a booth at six public events over the summer to educate the wider public about the importance of downtown revitalization to Rifle's economy.



Favorites:

activity can turn a parking lot into place

cultural destination point

downtown palette
(and parking problem)

Based on its successes in Garfield County, we are planning two additional CDAs for the City of Glenwood Springs and another for the City of Rifle in fall 2013. These upcoming courses will feature an even greater emphasis on leadership, facilitation, and public engagement skill-building with the goal of fostering a deeper interest in public service in these communities. Going forward, we plan to use CDAs in other counties across western Colorado as there is need.

Innovative: The Community Development Academy training model is innovative to planning in Colorado because it places an emphasis on education, training and dialogue for furthering quality planning in Colorado communities. As planning professionals know well, educated and passionate community leaders are absolutely essential to plan implementation. Our goal is to not only further the education and leadership skills of existing community leaders, but to also engage new individuals who are aspiring to serve their community. Graduates of the Community Development Academy leave the training with a broader understanding of planning principles, but perhaps most importantly, they leave having built relationships with other regional leaders and can form future partnerships to make real change happen. Also as a result of this approach, the community benefits from an engaged group taking a leadership role to broaden support for solid planning principles, expanding the champions for planning beyond local government staff or officials.

Transferable: The Community Development Academy is simply a training formula that can be tailored to meet the specific educational needs of a community or region. It was designed to be an easily transferable tool that can be used anywhere. The core elements of the CDA are training on relevant topics, interactive activities for participants to put the concepts to work, and open dialogue about the issues. The topics are different every time we execute a CDA, but are always grounded in the needs of the community or region. The Colorado Department of Local Affairs is a partner in Rifle's transit oriented development planning project. DOLA found this Academy approach in Rifle so exciting, they regularly share the CDA as a best practice to communities statewide.

Excellent: When planning for a CDA, we strive to bring regional experts in to "train" on each topic. It is always our top goal to bring in experts that are familiar with the specific community or region undergoing the training. Past expert trainers have included Jim Charlier of Charlier Associates, Chuck Perry of Perry Rose LLC, Tim Van Meter of Van Meter, William, Pollack, and Andrew Knudtsen of Economic & Planning Systems, among many others. All were involved in projects in Garfield County or the City of Rifle, so they were able to expertly address the topics in a very relevant, community-specific manner.

Promotes community progress: It is difficult to overstate the impact that the Community Development Academy has had on so many of the participants. We have seen some elected officials completely change how they approach planning issues, and have seen a change in how decision-making processes are facilitated. The approach also informs public policy development by adding more diverse perspectives, and broadens support for good planning among citizen leaders.

Effective: One of the best success indicators of the Community Development Academies is that we've been asked to do them again. The City of Rifle invited us to do a follow-up academy that will bring former participants even farther along in their skills, as well as recruit new leaders. Much of the "buzz" about the Rifle Academy was spread by the citizen action group that stemmed from the CDA while they hosted booths last summer at public events to inform other residents about the importance of downtown revitalization for Rifle. We also had four elected and appointed officials from the City of Glenwood Springs participate in our Garfield County CDA, and they felt it was so valuable that they have arranged to have a CDA specific to Glenwood Springs that we will be executing this fall.

Unique: Another interesting factor that makes the CDA such a unique experience includes the "breaking of bread" before each meeting. We found that providing dinner for the participants not only helped make the timing of attending the sessions more convenient, it also helped foster an atmosphere of camaraderie among the participants. This was especially important for the regionally focused, county-wide CDA. Breaking down barriers among municipal and county leaders was one of the greatest outcomes of the CDA, and the casual and fun atmosphere of the trainings had a lot to do with it.

