

Engaging for Community Solutions In Parks & Housing

Award Video



In 2015 the City of Gunnison purchased the 15-acre former Lazy K resort property to serve two of the greatest community needs: affordable housing and a community park. For the past decade the wooded area, ponds, meadows, wetlands, three small remaining cabins and abandoned commercial building have mostly only been known by wildlife and neighbors that stroll overgrown paths to the river. It is a rare feat to develop a property accomplishing both housing and city park objectives with respect for nature and neighbors. These are also costly investments for City of 6,500 people with only \$16 million in annual appropriations for all of its strategic priorities. Thus, it was critical to have a planning process that forged informed community collaboration with goals of building partnerships with other organizations and private sector for funding, grant seeking and implementation.

This project was nominated for a public engagement award to acknowledge the community for its success in quickly reaching consensus and serves as a model process. Innovative methods used in this process ensured plans were inclusive and executable. Planning and design consultants from Design Workshop Inc, skillfully crafted and led a series of events over three-days that provided clear communication, efficient and meaningful use of everyone's time, and facilitated collaboration finding community supported solutions. The first day was about exploration, with multiple groups meeting at the future park/housing property encouraging them to make observations and share stories about the site. A youth scavenger hunt, affordable housing forum picnic, water/natural resource expert hike, recreation advocate tour, seniors forum, and a neighbor walking tour were highlights, followed by a community idea generation and prioritization meeting.

Over the following two days community members worked alongside Design Workshop park designers and community planners to identify and illustrate three alternative options for the park and housing configurations that enhance qualities of the site, allowing community directed evaluation to bring about a preferred concept plan. Community Interactions with city staff, committees and elected officials created a rapid information and decision loop with technical experts and designers. Voices of the youngest and the oldest of the population were amplified as engagement methods tailored to their interests and abilities ensured their input shaped the plan.

The park concept master plan communicates form-giving, function, and celebration of the specialness of this place located along the Gunnison River. The design could have become constrained by budgetary limitations, but instead designers heard directly the importance of fiscal sustainability and utilized this workshop as an opportunity for discovering creative funding source and maintenance opportunities.

The process employed for the West Gunnison Park and Site Master Plan can be recognized as outstanding for its results:

- Full endorsement of City leadership;
- Buy-in from neighbors and from recreation groups;
- Gaining sponsorship and support from partners and multiple State grants with construction dollars dedicated to completion in 2021; and
- The process generated public discussion and buy-in for housing density and types, setting the stage for a smooth and unanimous Sketch Plan approval for 41 affordable housing units.
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