Santa Rosa Together: A Case Study of an Ongoing Effort to Rebuild Democracy at the Local Level

BY HANK TOPPER

Experimentation with renewed forms of democracy at the local level has been underway for up to 20 years in cities such as Portland (Oregon), Seattle, Dallas, and Minneapolis–Saint Paul, to name just a few. Related efforts can be found in various forms in cities and towns across the nation. Organizations representing local governments, like the National League of Cities and the International City/County Management Association, are encouraging and promoting this effort. The work to rebuild democracy at the local level builds on the democratic experiments of the past 20 years and takes them a step further by showing how they can be incorporated into a more complete system of democratic governance in a town or city and by demonstrating that it works. If this effort to rebuild democracy at the local level can succeed and spread, it will give people the chance to experience democracy firsthand. As a result, this bottom-up work to rebuild democracy with its ability to demonstrate a workable alternative to our current politics has the real, if not immediate, potential to transform our politics.

But, to a large extent, these efforts are themselves still mostly isolated from each other. If this work is going to eventually develop into a viable alternative to our current politics, there will need to be more communication among the ongoing local efforts to share lessons and to begin to build the ties that will be necessary to challenge our current politics. In the spirit of developing ties and sharing lessons, I have produced the following case study of a five-year effort of a broad coalition of volunteer community members to strengthen local democracy in Santa Rosa, California.

I was one of the participants in the work described. Other key participants in the work reviewed, commented on, and made significant contributions to this case study.

Santa Rosa is located in Sonoma County about fifty miles north of San Francisco. Santa Rosa is the county seat and the largest city in the County with a population of about 170,000. The population is about 60 percent white, 28 percent Hispanic or Latino, 5 percent Asian, 5 percent two or more races, 2.4 percent black or African American, and 1.7 percent American Indian. Santa Rosa has a city manager form of government with a city council whose seven members are elected at large. Every two years, the council selects one of its members to serve as mayor.

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Building a Coalition and Organizing the City's First Neighbors Summit 2010

The work to strengthen local democracy was initiated by the Neighborhood Alliance, an influential group of neighborhood leaders with a long history of working to influence city government around neighborhood planning decisions. The Neighborhood Alliance draws its members from the approximately ten established and organized neighborhoods, most of them clustered around the older center of the city. Most of the newer areas of the city, representing about two-thirds of the city's population, do not have neighborhood organizations. As this work began, our city council was split into two opposing camps, one identified as the pro-development camp, the other as the pro-environment camp. In 2008, the pro-environment camp had won a majority of seats on the council for the first time, but the election

was sharply contested and city politics seemed to be becoming more and more adversarial.

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The immediate impulse for this new initiative came from a couple of failed planning efforts with the city that had left neighborhood leaders feeling that their voices were being ignored and that neighborhoods were not seen as valued partners. There was a strong perception among neighborhood leaders that development interests got favored treatment by city government at the expense of neighborhoods and the environment. In this context, early in 2010, the Neighborhood Alliance decided to start a new initiative to directly address these concerns. A small group, including Neighborhood Alliance members, the current mayor, a supporter of the Neighborhood Alliance, and the chair of the city's Community Advisory Board, met and decided to begin the work to organize a city-wide meeting of neighborhoods to strengthen the visibility of neighborhoods and to begin to build a different kind of partnership with the city.

With these goals in mind, regular meetings were held over the spring and summer to build a coalition, clarify its goals, and to organize the city-wide Neighbors Summit scheduled for late August. Planning meetings were held biweekly with between 12 and 15 participants. Overall, the coalition, now calling itself the Neighbors Summit Coalition, engaged between 30 and 40 individuals in this work. Building the coalition required a series of discussions to clarify goals and to translate them into the content of the Neighbors Summit and multiple one-on-one conversations across the city to introduce the coalition and recruit new members. After six months of preparation and outreach, the first Neighbors Summit took place over two days in late August 2010. It began on a Friday evening with Jim Diers, former head of the Department of

Neighborhoods in Seattle, as the keynote speaker for the summit. Jim spoke to a standing room audience of about 180 people in City Council Chambers in downtown Santa Rosa. The summit itself, held on the following day, brought over 200 neighborhood and city activists together for workshops and discussions on strengthening neighborhoods and improving the partnership between neighborhoods and the city government. The four-hour summit was held in a city community center. Included were a free lunch, translation services, childcare, and a resource fair featuring organizations and programs available to support neighborhoods. The volunteer coalition, with the support of student volunteers from a local high school, organized and carried out all aspects of the keynote event and the Neighbors Summit. The city, as one of the members of the coalition, covered the approximately $4,000.00 in costs for the event including the speaker, food, and printing. The city also donated the spaces for both the keynote address and the summit.

Based on a survey of the summit attendees and the views of the coalition members, the summit was an outstanding success. Work on the summit helped to build a broad coalition around the summit goals, initiate a discussion in the city on the role of neighborhoods and their relationship to city government, and put forward an alternative vision for politics in Santa Rosa. Overall, the summit seemed to give a real boost to the new effort to renew democracy in the city.

The makeup of the coalition that organized the first Neighbors Summit provides a good indication of the parts of the city interested in working to create a better politics. Volunteers and support came from six main sources: neighborhood organizations, health organizations, local NGOs, city staff and elected officials, members of the city's Community Advisory Board, and student groups. Here is a more detailed look at participation for each area:

Neighborhood organizations: Santa Rosa has about 10 neighborhood organizations covering about a third of the city's area. Some of these organizations are fairly strong and active, but others, possibly the majority of them, were small and inactive. The core group of neighborhood leaders and activists, maybe a dozen in all, from across the city are organized

and active in the city-wide Neighborhood Alliance. This group has been an active progressive force in the city for some time. Members and leaders of this organization, along with the mayor at the time and other members, took the lead in organizing the Neighbors Summit Coalition. Individual neighborhood leaders, most of them members of the Neighborhood Alliance, formed the core of the initial coalition that coalesced around the Neighbors Summit work.

Health organizations: In Santa Rosa, both the county health department and some local health providers are committed to a community-based approach to health that promotes community engagement and organization as a key to improved health. In recent years, Health Action, a broad county-wide coalition, was formed to coordinate efforts to improve health. The Health Action coalition is also committed to a community-based approach and has identified citizen connectedness as a priority goal. In addition, one local health provider, the St. Joseph Health System, has employed a team of community organizers working to build community engagement for the past ten years in several areas of the city. Both St. Joseph community organizers and staff of the County Health Department worked actively as a part of the Neighbors Summit coalition.

Local NGOs: Two local organizations became active members of the coalition from the start. The Community Action Partnership, a large and leading organization providing services to the local community, especially the Latino community, joined and has been a strong part of the coalition from the beginning. This organization, part of a large national network of organizations that came originally out of the federal focus on community empowerment in the 60s, is committed to community engagement and sees the work of strengthening democracy as central to its mission. The Leadership Institute for Ecology and the Economy, a local not-for-profit that has provided successful leadership training in the county for many years, also joined the coalition. The director of this NGO chaired the coalition for its first two years, using the resources of her organization to support and advertise the coalition and its work.

City staff and elected officials: With support from the mayor, the council majority, and the acting city manager, city staff, especially one individual, joined and provided strong support to the work of the coalition. But more importantly, city staff provided access to public spaces for coalition meetings and for the summit, logistical support, and communication with all city departments. Council members helped with outreach and encouragement.

Santa Rosa's Community Advisory Board: Santa Rosa has a council-appointed board of 14 citizens to advise the council on community issues. The board cosponsored the Neighbors Summit and several members of the board were also members of the Neighbors Summit coalition. The sponsorship of the Neighbors Summit by the Community Advisory Board was especially important because it provided the means for the city to legally fund the work. The director of the Leadership NGO mentioned previously served as chair of both the Community Advisory Board and the Neighbors Summit Coalition.

Student leaders and organizations: A student leader at the Santa Rosa Junior College and a high school activist, who was also a member of the Community Advisory Board, joined and supported the coalition. LoBo Unity, a civic club at Elsie Allen High School, provided a large group of volunteers to help with the logistics of the summit.

These groups formed the basis for the start of the work to strengthen our local democracy. More sectors and organizations, as will be described further, joined as the work developed.

The beginning work immediately uncovered some of the key issues that continue to define the work in Santa Rosa. First, it became obvious from the start that the language used to reform politics had to be framed in terms of concrete goals recognizable in the Santa Rosa context. Calling for "rebuilding democracy" was simply too abstract to have any meaning in Santa Rosa politics. While the work in Santa Rosa demonstrates that there is still a strong commitment to the values of democracy, the confusion over how these values apply and questions about their viability in American politics meant that the work needed to be translated into concrete goals, reflecting some more immediate steps. The coalition actually had to spend a considerable amount of time in its first year

working to articulate a mission that made sense in Santa Rosa. This work to clarify the mission of the coalition and its relationship to current politics was and is an ongoing part of the coalition work. It is actually rare for a coalition meeting to happen without someone bringing up the question about who are we and what are we doing.

The following is the articulation of the mission that was developed in the fall of 2010 following the first Neighbors Summit. Further refinements of the coalition's mission statement that were created as the work developed are included later in this case study.

The first-ever Neighbors Summit 2010 was a hugely successful weekend event that brought together over 200 neighbors and leaders from across Santa Rosa. Together, participants began working to create a common vision and develop plans to:

- strengthen neighborhoods and neighborhood organizations,
- facilitate communication in and among neighborhoods, and
- improve neighborhood and government partnership.

Committees have been established and we are not only working toward strengthening neighborhoods, improve city/neighbors partnerships, but we are also beginning to plan the 2011 Neighbors Summit.

Who we are: We are a broad coalition of neighborhood, city government, business, and nonprofit leaders who came together to organize Santa Rosa's first-ever Neighbors Summit.

Where we are going: We share a common vision of a city with engaged citizens and strong neighborhood and community organizations working in partnership with city government to build a vibrant and healthy community. We know that our city faces serious challenges, and we believe that we need to engage all of our residents and find better ways to work together to meet those challenges. We know that building the partnerships we need will require changes on all sides: citizens willing to take more responsibility and

our government and organizations willing to partner with and share power with citizens and their organizations. Our summit demonstrated the possibility and potential of this vision and we are committed to the long-term work to realize our goal of a stronger and healthier Santa Rosa.

The second issue raised centered on the question of the how and where to form an organization to do this work. From the beginning, the coalition decided to form a separate and independent organization. This decision was based on the view that both the Alliance and the Community Advisory Board were closely identified with certain positions or institutions and that this identification would limit the coalition's ability to build a broad and nonpartisan movement for basic political reform. The relationship to the Alliance, whose members played the lead in organizing this work, was the most problematic. As a leading voice in the city for progressive politics especially around sustainability and environmental issues, the Alliance was clearly identified with a particular stand on these issues. The potential problem with organizing as a part of the Alliance was illustrated by the fact that one of the city's strongest neighborhoods had recently left the Alliance because they did not agree with all of its positions and the role it was playing in city politics. This identification of the Alliance with a broad platform of progressive politics was especially significant in the context of the city's overall political culture that was becoming more adversarial and with the city's elected officials becoming increasingly divided into competing pro-development and pro-environment camps. So, the decision to create an independent organization that focused only on goals related to civic engagement and improved governance allowed the coalition to maintain a nonpartisan stand on issues and unite a broad range of organizations and individuals around a common interest in improving the city's basic civic capacity. This decision was a key to including some of the key members of the coalition, including the city government and the health-related organizations at the start and then others, including businesses, as the work continued. A clearer connection to the Alliance would have made their participation more difficult if not impossible. But this decision was controversial and there continued for some time to be an effort to pull the

work under either the Alliance or the Community Advisory Board. The independence of the coalition became more of an issue when the majority on the council shifted with the election that followed the first Neighbors Summit.

The issue of the organizational independence of a coalition to improve the city's democracy is closely related to a third issue that arose as the work developed: the tension that developed between the work to build civic capacity and the current issue-based political culture of the city. In Santa Rosa, and perhaps California in general, a large number of political activists are organized into groups focused on particular issues. Issue activists tend to take the current form of politics as a given, generally acting as special interest groups vying for power in a zero sum politics. From this perspective, any loss of focus, which the work on improving local democracy can be seen as, seems at best like a distraction and, at worst, a plot designed by opposing special interests to get an advantage. This dilemma has continued to come up in the coalition's work over the five years covered in this case study. At its core, it is the dilemma presented by the reality of having to operate in the current adversarial and power-based political culture while working to change politics so that it is focused on including everyone and working together to find common ground. As a result, in the work around any particular issue, the focus on improving democracy tries to include everyone in the discussion, including those who oppose the position of an issue group, helps the different positions present their best case, and relies on the conversation among all the participants to come up with an approach that is acceptable to most. From the view of those engaged in the struggle of current politics, this can seem to be both unrealistic and mistaken. This dilemma came up most concretely every time the coalition reached out to try to include a group or organization that was viewed as standing on the wrong side of a current struggle around an issue. It also comes up more immediately in each individual's choice of where to put his or her energies. Only if we think that our politics can be different, will we see the benefit of focusing some of our energy on civic reform. Once again, the Neighborhood Alliance serves as an example. Despite the fact that the Alliance took the lead in organizing

the coalition, many members of this group did not actively participate in the work of the coalition, focusing their energies instead around other issues that faced the city. This dilemma has also found expression in the confusion among members of the Alliance about the purpose of the coalition and its relationship to the Alliance. The coalition sought from the beginning to find ways to make the work of strengthening democracy complement and not compete with the work on other issues and other community priorities.

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Once again, a commitment to including the work of the coalition as a priority comes down to recognizing that rebuilding democracy is both possible and worth focusing on. To recognize that rebuilding democracy was possible helped to identify concrete actions that could be taken that would help to rebuild democracy. The work to organize the summit provided people in Santa Rosa with these concrete goals and actions and it was this that attracted volunteers and made the work successful. People could see how the summit would help to organize and strengthen neighborhoods and how it might give neighborhoods more of a voice in the city by improving city government's ability to partner with neighborhoods. Recognition of the worth of this effort can come from a realization that progress on any of the issues important to the community will only happen if we can create a better kind of politics, one that can both include more people and help them find common ground. It may also come from the recognition of the value of democracy itself for its ability to promote a way of life that includes everyone and values and respects their potential to contribute to a fuller life for everyone. Explaining and discussing these ideas became a part of most of the conversations around the work of the Neighbors Summit coalition.

Once the summit was held, the coalition faced the challenge of figuring out the next steps to keep this work moving. The limited capacity of the coalition to actually organize neighborhoods plus the change in the city politics with the council election in the November weakened the partnership with the city and would make this task more difficult.

Building Momentum and Hitting Roadblocks: From 2010 to 2012

Coalition members took a deep breath and a break after the first summit, and so the follow-up meeting to the event did not take place until early November. In addition to the need for a break, two other things contributed to this delay. First, city elections were held in November 2010, and many coalition members shifted their attention to local campaigns until after the elections. Second, in October, the head of the city's Parks and Rec Department, the department with the staff person who directly supported the summit, organized a city delegation to visit Portland and Seattle to learn more about their approach to neighborhood organization. The department head's reason for taking this initiative seemed to come both from an interest in the new approaches raised by the summit and a concern for which department might get the additional resources if the city decided to place more priority on neighborhood involvement. Two leaders of the summit coalition were invited to join this delegation to Portland and Seattle. Information from this trip was presented to the city at a public forum held in spring 2011.

The outcome of the city council elections significantly changed the political context for the Neighbors Summit work. The majority of the council in a generally adversarial climate shifted from pro-environment and neighborhood to pro-development forces. A new mayor, selected by the new council majority, replaced the mayor who had helped to organize the summit. The new council's focus on jobs and development and a lingering identification of the summit work with the former council majority and mayor created a very different climate in city government for the work of the summit. Working with and in this new political environment became the challenge for the next year.

But the election and the new council majority were too new to have an effect on the November 16, 2010, coalition meeting to plan the next steps for the work of the Neighbors Summit. About 50 people, either existing coalition members or new contacts developed from the work on the summit, came together in this meeting to discuss next steps for the summit. This group reaffirmed the summit's two main goals, identified four areas of work, and organized committees to move the work forward. A committee, formed around the goal of strengthening neighborhoods, was organized to identify existing organizations, map organized and unorganized neighborhoods, target key neighborhoods for organization, and promote community building work in all neighborhoods. A second committee, formed around the coalition's partnership goal, committed to reach out to more organizations to bring them into the coalition, meet with the new city council and the new city manager who would be starting work in January to win their support, and work with the city to form a taskforce to develop new guidelines for city and neighborhood interaction. A third committee was formed to focus on developing an internet-based method for improving communication in and among neighborhoods. And, finally, at the request of several high school and junior college students, the coalition also decided to support the efforts of students and youth in the city to organize a youth summit.

The four coalition committees and a steering committee organized to coordinate the work began meeting in January 2011. As the work progressed, the composition of the coalition became clear. In all, about 30 volunteers joined the committees and committed to working on the goals set in the November meeting. The coalition expanded to include two new organizations representing local businesses, an additional staff person from the city, and several members of the Community Advisory Board. Despite the new additions, the overall composition of the coalition remained about the same as before the summit, continuing to be made up of neighborhood activists, staff from NGOs mostly concentrated in the health field, and members of the Community Advisory Board. Perhaps most significantly, the participation of neighborhoods and neighborhood leaders in the coalition did not grow, remaining relatively small overall.

Given the strong representation of city-wide NGOs and organizations in the coalition, it should be no surprise that the committee focused on broadening the partnership had the most members and was most active during the second year of the coalition. This Partnership Committee of about 12 members met every other week starting in January, developed an outreach plan and talking points, and organized teams to reach out and bring new partners into the coalition. The teams focused primarily on reaching out to the new city council majority to try to convince them that the work on the coalition goals was a nonpartisan effort to strengthen local democracy that could be supported by the full council. But given the council's focus on jobs and development and the lingering identification of the coalition with the former council majority, the results of the outreach to the council majority were not successful.

The outreach to the new city manager to solidify the city's participation in and support for the coalition was, at best, inconclusive. As a sign of the city's withdrawal from the coalition, the city staff person from the Parks and Rec Department, who had played a leading role in the coalition work, was laid off and not immediately replaced, leaving the coalition without a representative from the city. This change was made without any consultation with the coalition or the Community Advisory Board. In response to our inquiries about the meaning of the loss of the key staff person in our coalition, the city manager announced that she intended to strengthen the work on public participation by centralizing this work in her office to provide more access to all city departments and by hiring a new staff person to lead the work. But with the sudden loss of the key staff person without any consultation and with the long delay in finding a replacement, the level of support for the coalition by the new city manager seemed, at best, unclear.

The Partnership Committee's outreach to other organizations fared better. Committee members met with key members of the coalition to consolidate their support and with new business organizations to try to broaden the coalition and overcome the divisions in city politics. Meetings with the Chamber of Commerce, although only preliminary, opened the door to a possible partnership with

neighborhoods around development and around the goals of the coalition. Overall, despite the fact that the Partnership Committee ran into some real problems with the changed political context, the committee members were engaged and active. Most importantly, the coalition continued to provide a way for the various sectors of the community to come together and develop a common approach to improving local governance.

The work of the coalition committee set up to survey and map existing neighborhoods and to organize and strengthen neighborhoods was less successful. The committee made some significant progress with the survey of existing organizations using an online survey and telephone interviews with all the neighborhood contacts developed through the work around the first Neighbors Summit. The committee also developed a short guide on how to organize a block party, a first step toward the development of a toolbox of organizing tools for neighborhoods. But, the committee's work to organize new neighborhoods also did not make much progress. The Neighbors Summit coalition goal of helping ten unorganized neighborhoods to get organized turned out to be unrealistic. The Neighborhood Organizing committee, even though it was chaired by one of the strongest neighborhood leaders in the city, simply did not have the capacity to take on the task of helping a neighborhood get organized. The committee did not have enough experienced neighborhood organizers and there were, in fact, few requests from neighborhoods asking for assistance. Given the fact that only about a third of the city's neighborhoods had organizations, the coalition's limited ability to reach out to new neighborhoods and help them organize presented a key limit to the coalition's ability to reach its goals.

The coalition committees continued their work through the early part of 2011, but by April the main work shifted again to the coalition's steering committee and to the organization and outreach for the second Neighbors Summit, scheduled for a Friday and Saturday in late August. The annual Neighborhood Summit, with its potential to draw a broad audience of neighborhood activists from across the city, became more important as it appeared to be the only realistic means for

the coalition to reach out and help unorganized neighborhoods.

The Neighbors Summit coalition did extensive outreach for this second summit with posters, e-mail messages, radio announcements, and newspaper ads. Once again, the city provided the venues and funding to pay for printing and keynote speaker costs. All other work was done by the coalition of volunteers and staff from the different organizations participating in the coalition.

The coalition, as a reflection of the change in support from the city, also changed the design of the summit, putting more emphasis on the goal of organizing and strengthening neighborhoods than on the goal of improving the partnership with city government. The second Neighbors Summit included 11 different workshops organized into three tracks: getting more people involved and organized; building healthy and sustainable neighborhoods; and organizing for safe, clean, and resilient neighborhoods. The coalition drew on the resources of all its members, neighborhoods, and organizations, to prepare for and provide the workshops. This summit also provided organized opportunities for residents from the same area of the city to meet and identify common interests for follow-up after the summit. And, as it had for the first summit, the coalition sponsored key note speakers at city hall on Friday evening, the day before the summit. This year, Amalia Alarcon de Morris, Head of Portland's Office of Neighborhood Involvement, and Linda Nettekoven, one of Portland's best known neighborhood leaders, gave the keynote presentation.

Overall, the second Neighbors Summit, held in August 2011, seemed to meet the needs of neighborhood activists. The new design around workshops got high marks from the attendees, especially new neighborhood organizers looking to get started. But the number of people reached and introduced to neighborhood organizing did not match the expectations of the coalition. Instead of reaching its goal of an increase in attendees from the previous year, the number of attendees declined to about 120. A conversation about the reasons for this decline would become a focus for the next year in the coalition.

When the coalition met in September to evaluate the second summit and make plans for the year, it summarized its overall progress as follows:

Where we are now:

- We have a good start on highlighting and explaining the importance of strengthening neighborhoods and improving the partnership between neighborhoods and other organizations as the foundation for a healthy and sustainable city.
- We now have a solid core group united around the importance of the summit goals with good experience and pretty broad reach.
- We have a better understanding of the state of neighborhood organizations and pretty good contact with many of the city's neighborhood leaders.
- We have a good idea of how to proceed at the neighborhood level based on the outcomes from the summit's city area meetings.
- We have fairly strong ties with and support from a range of organizations and community leaders, including some strong partners like the Leadership Institute, CAP, and the County Health Department. Our partnership with city government is not strong and, for now, it looks like we cannot expect the city to provide leadership to the work to reach the summit goals.

The summit coalition decided once again to focus on neighborhood organizing:

The key to moving forward over the next year seems to be to focus our work on the first of our two goals: strengthening and organizing neighborhoods. At this point, the city government does not really take us seriously as a real partner. The best way to change this is for us to demonstrate that neighborhoods count and that building and partnering with neighborhoods offers a new and better way of doing business. We can best accomplish this and win the city over to partnering with neighborhoods by focusing our work on getting more people involved, improving neighborhood organization and leadership, and by getting more neighborhoods organized.

The coalition hoped that the neighborhood contacts made and the ideas generated at the second summit would make the neighborhood level work more successful than the previous year. In meetings held over the next several months, the coalition identified key areas of the city for work and members of the coalition steering committee each took responsibility for work in an area. Eleven neighborhoods with contacts identified at the Neighbors Summits were targeted for outreach and support.

But despite this concentrated effort, this work made little progress. Once again, the reality was that active coalition members, despite their best intentions and with support from the coalition, did not have the time and/or skills necessary to find and work with neighborhood leaders in the unorganized sections of the city. The two successful neighborhood strengthening efforts that did make progress occurred in areas where coalition members had direct ties, one in a neighborhood where a coalition member worked as a staff member of a community-based service organization and another in a neighborhood where several coalition members lived and participated in the neighborhood association. The lack of the resources needed to work with unorganized neighborhoods remained a key barrier to achieving the goals of the coalition. It took a few more years of work to finally develop the ability to address this issue.

In addition to its neighborhood work, the Neighbors Summit Coalition also played a role in the city's charter review process that took place in 2011 and 2012. This once-every-ten-year process gave the coalition an opportunity to raise the issues of broader engagement and a new role for government to the Charter Review Commission and a broader audience. The coalition, in partnership with Community Advisory Board, focused its input in the charter review process on the work to develop and strengthen the role of the city's Community Advisory Board. This resulted in a new council resolution for the board that set community building, neighborhood organizing, and review of the city's community involvement work as the official focus for the board's work. This was a major accomplishment for the board and the coalition that helped to legitimize the work to organize neighborhoods and build engagement as a city priority. Despite this new

resolution, the city's lack of support for the board limited its ability to implement this new resolution.

In the year following the second summit, the majority of council members and the city government leadership continued to be either uninterested or actively opposed to the work of the coalition. This opposition made the work of the coalition difficult. Our city government, both elected leaders and city staff, are the key to any effort to change the way we work together. Without their active participation in the effort, it is difficult to make much progress and it is impossible to demonstrate the value that can result from a government that values engagement. Despite these difficulties, the goals and the work of the coalition continued to have broad appeal and attract new members.

In February 2012, planning for a possible third Neighbors Summit began. As the coalition discussed and evaluated its second summit and its lower attendance, it concluded that the all-day workshop format of the first two summits demanded a high level of commitment that limited its audience primarily to the already organized neighborhoods and engaged neighborhood leaders. The format did not seem to fit the coalition's goal of reaching out to the unorganized sections of the city and helping new neighborhood leaders get engaged. As a result, the coalition decided to make a major change in the format for its third major event. Instead of a workshop format, the coalition decided to hold a Festival of Neighborhoods downtown in the city square. The festival would be a celebration that would highlight the importance of neighborhood organizations and give neighbors and families an opportunity to visit a fun event and be inspired with the work that neighborhoods can do, and are doing, to create healthy and strong communities. The festival would include booths highlighting the activities of organized neighborhoods, a resource fair to demonstrate the support that exists for neighborhoods, fun activities for children, music, and food.

By late spring, the coalition again focused all of its volunteers on the work to prepare for this festival. This involved publicity, recruiting neighborhoods to demonstrate their activities, organizing the resources fair, and arranging for the food, music, and activities for kids. The city continued to provide

funding for the logistics and publicity and the support of one staff person for this event. The volunteers of the Neighbors Summit Coalition continued to lead and provide the main support for this work.

The Festival of Neighborhoods held on Saturday, July 29, between 12:00 and 4:00 P.M., turned out to be the Neighbors Summit Coalition's third successful event. Twelve neighborhoods set up booths highlighting their neighborhoods and their neighborhood activities. NGOs and government agencies set up booths with resources and information for neighborhoods. The festival included food vendors, activities for kids, awards and drawings, and a bike parade from neighborhoods to the festival with free valet bike parking for the event. Over 200 people attended the festival, including 80 who biked to the festival from designated starting points in different parts of the city. Overall, the festival seemed to succeed in its attempt to build support for organized neighborhoods and to raise the visibility and importance of neighborhood organizations to the city. This was the third major event organized by the Neighbor Summit Coalition, and its success solidified the reputation of the organization as an important voice in city.

Despite this success, the Neighbors Summit Coalition still felt limited in its ability to organize new neighborhoods and build a movement that could have the strength to change the culture of city government. In reality, it was also becoming clear that the coalition might not have the energy and resources to organize a fourth major neighborhood event. So, in the months following the summit, the coalition decided on a major change in direction.

Changing Direction From Neighbors Summit to Santa Rosa Together: From 2012 to 2015

In August and September of 2012, the core members of the Neighbors Summit Coalition, met to reflect on the past three years of work. Everyone agreed that the coalition had reached a limit in its ability to move forward and that a new approach would be needed to build a movement that would be strong enough to make progress without the support of city government. The coalition decided that to broaden the movement and strengthen its volunteer organization, it would need to move beyond the focus

on giving neighborhoods a voice and find a way to address what they believed was the underlying need to improve the way neighborhoods and citizens worked together in Santa Rosa. The coalition saw the lack of a voice for neighborhoods as just one part of a broader lack of engagement and voice for citizens and a growing inability to find common ground and work together in the city. So, the coalition decided to shift direction and try to form a new organization that could move beyond the focus of neighborhood organizations and speak to the general dissatisfaction with the state of local democracy.

The coalition hoped this new direction would provide a place for anyone interested in improving local politics. The interest in strengthening democracy speaks to the underlying, and still widespread, democratic values that cut across all sectors of the community. It includes the parts of the community that feel unrepresented and without a voice, including youth, minority communities, neighborhood leaders, young parents, seniors, and even the majority of average citizens of all backgrounds who feel like they do not have a voice and role in local affairs. It also includes activists who are tired of the adversarial politics and community leaders who value community and are looking for ways to build the community where they live and gather. Given the mostly unorganized character of the neighborhoods in Santa Rosa, the coalition hoped that this more general approach to improving the way citizens work together would be able to appeal to a broader range of community members who do not currently identify with a neighborhood.

Here is the first articulation of this new organization and new direction for the coalition written in August 2012, shortly after the Festival of Neighborhoods:

> *Santa Rosa Together* (Let's find a new name to replace the out-of-date Neighbors Summit Organization)
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> *Who we are*: We are a broad coalition of neighborhood and city leaders in Santa Rosa that has been working for the past four years to improve our local politics. We organized Santa Rosa's first two city-wide Neighbors Summits in 2010 and 2011 and the Festival of Neighborhoods in

2012. We have also helped to organize neighborhoods and held countless conversations across the city about our plans and goals. We are a nonpartisan volunteer coalition focused on bringing everyone into our politics and on improving our ability to learn from each other and work together. We began this work because we were, and are still, concerned that that our governments and our community institutions are not doing an adequate job in engaging and partnering with citizens and their organizations. We are concerned that not enough of our citizens are engaged and taking responsibility for their neighborhoods and the city. And, we are concerned that our politics, following much broader national trends, has become too adversarial and that we are losing our ability to find the common ground we need to move forward.

We are convinced that we can do better. We believe that we can create a local democracy that we can be proud of. We believe that each generation has the responsibility to renew our democracy to ensure that it remains relevant and real and we are working to live up to that responsibility. And, we are convinced that only a renewed democracy can tap the energy and commitment of citizens that we need to meet our challenges and create a great city.

What is our vision of a renewed democracy?

- Citizens across the city are engaged, organized, and taking responsibility for their communities and neighborhoods. Every neighborhood and all city-wide communities have strong and inclusive organizations.
- Governments and NGOs working in our city make it a priority to support the organization of citizens and have developed the capacity to partner with citizens and their organizations to make important decisions and to accomplish shared goals.
- Elected officials support broad community engagement and understand the role of democratic leaders to actively work to inform citizens and empower them to participate in the decisions and work of the city.
- We have developed and institutionalized creative new ways for citizens to become

informed, learn from each other, and participate meaningfully in the decisions and work that will shape our city.
- We have created a culture of mutual respect, dialogue, and inclusion that has improved our city's ability to work together and address concerns.

In addition to this new direction, the coalition also made an equally important change in direction by deciding to form a new and broader organization that could plan and sustain a long-term effort to reshape local politics. Recognizing that everyone is already busy with their own lives and with the work they are already doing in organizations addressing the important issues facing the city and their communities, the coalition decided to create a form of organization that would not compete with these important commitments. It would, instead, complement them by providing a place where everyone could come together, perhaps only a couple of times a year, to focus and work together on the fundamental task of improving the way communities engage everyone and work together in the city. As a part of its message, the coalition pointed out that progress on the work to address all of the challenges and opportunities facing the city depended ultimately on the basic capacity of the community to engage everyone and work together. The new organization, Santa Rosa Together, would be designed to give everyone the opportunity to take responsibility for and work on this basic capacity.

It is important to recognize that the coalition's ability to articulate and work on this new approach was based on the work it had done over the previous years. This work had helped to create a conversation about the need to improve the way members work together in the city, put the coalition in touch with a broad group of community leaders interested in finding a better way to work together, and made the coalition a legitimate voice in the city with a proven ability to mobilize and organize around important issues.

In the fall of 2012, the coalition began the effort to change direction and started the work to launch Santa Rosa Together. At that time, the effort was sustained by about ten community leaders who had worked together on the Neighborhood Summits and the Neighborhood Festival. The group put

together talking points to describe the new direction, assembled a list of 46 key people who they thought would be interested in helping to launch Santa Rosa Together, divided the list, and assigned members to reach out and personally contact everyone. Most of the people on the list were contacts made from the previous work; some were new contacts, key leaders in the community that the group wanted to try to include. This one-on-one outreach work went on through the fall and winter. By January 2013, the contact list had grown to 59 and over winter and spring there was encouraging progress in the work to recruit new members. The plan to expand beyond neighborhood leaders to all sectors of the community seemed to be working. New leaders joining the effort included several members of the business community, new representatives of local churches focused on building community, staff, and board members of a major nonprofit service provider and several other NGO leaders, youth leaders, County Health Department leadership, and members and staff of the Santa Rosa School District. Neighborhood leaders continued to participate as well.

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By May, the group had completed most of its outreach and had gotten positive responses, but it still had only nine people committed to the work to launch the new organization. So, the group decided to return to everyone they had contacted who shared the vision of the need to find a better way to work together in the city and ask them to join a planning committee and attend the first meeting to begin the work to hold the first meeting of Santa Rosa Together. Here is part of the message from the group's talking points used for this outreach:

> We know that you support and have helped us to develop the plan we have to move all of us toward this vision. As you know, we are

planning to hold a broad meeting of about 100 leaders from all sectors of our community to talk about our capacity to work together, create a shared vision, assess the current status of our civic capacity, and identify and implement practical steps that we can take that will move us forward—a meeting that will give a voice and a commitment to our belief that we can create the kind of real democracy that we need.

Now we are coming back to you to tell you that we need your help to move this forward. We have ten people now committed to moving this work and it is not enough. Realistically speaking, we need at least 20 people to commit to working together to plan and organize the Santa Rosa Together meeting we have been talking about. We have met a lot of people who share our vision and now we are going back to them to get their commitment to the work we need to move forward.

We know you are busy and that your work and commitments are important—even overwhelming. But the change that we are talking about and that we all know we need is going to require some new initiative and commitment from somewhere. It is going to take a commitment for people like you to move it forward and to get it to the point where our organizations and institutions can make it a part of their work. Until then, we have no choice but to find a way to commit our own time to make this happen. Really important and fundamental change of the kind we are talking about requires a special commitment. We need your leadership and time now.

The response to this request turned out to be better than expected and in June, 32 people met to begin the work to plan for the first meeting of Santa Rosa Together. The new planning group included neighborhood leaders, a member of the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors, two city council members, City Community Advisory Board members, local school board and school staff members, county Health department staff, staff from several not-for-profit organizations, and business representatives. The call for launching a new and broad-based organization to focus on improving the way neighborhoods work together in the city was an encouraging sign

of a widespread desire for change in the city and a confirmation of the decision to broaden the work beyond its focus on neighborhood leaders.

The start of this effort to launch Santa Rosa Together marked a turning point in the effort to strengthen local democracy. The group that assembled for this work was now, for the first time, diverse enough to model the kind of democracy the coalition was working toward. Now the group included very diverse political views, involving business leaders, elected officials, church leaders, Latino leaders, school district leaders, youth, and environmentalists, all working together to build trust and ensure that everyone has a voice in the city. From this point on, it would become harder and harder for anyone to view this effort as anything but a broad and nonpartisan effort to improve the way citizens work together in the city. Trust among these volunteers continued to build as they worked together to launch Santa Rosa Together.

This group, eventually ending up with about 20 active members, met through the summer and fall to plan and organize the first meeting of Santa Rosa Together. The group, now called the Santa Rosa Together Planning Committee, set the following goals for the meeting that would launch the new organization:

- Agree on a common vision for a city with strong civic engagement and a strong ability to find common ground and work together
- Assess the current strengths and weaknesses of our neighborhoods, governments, and organizations to support civic engagement and enhance our ability to work together
- Set goals and commitments for work that will improve civic engagement and our ability to work together during the year following the launch of the new organization

By September, the planning committee decided that it would be impossible to accomplish these goals in one meeting so they made a risky decision to hold three separate two-hour Saturday morning meetings to launch Santa Rosa Together, with the first meeting scheduled for November. The group wanted to ensure that there was enough time for full discussions of all aspects of the work and to

ensure that the discussions were done in a manner that gave the participants a chance to get to know each other and begin to build the relationships that would be needed to sustain a long-term effort. The three meetings were designed around a six-step process that would culminate in an action plan and teams. Here is the description of the meetings and steps included in the first outreach handout:

First Meeting: November 2013

- Step One: Share our experiences to develop a common understanding of the current strengths and weaknesses of our ability to engage residents and work together.
- Step Two: Create a common vision of a city that engages its residents in the decisions and work of the city and knows how to find common ground and work together.

Second Meeting: January 2014

- Step Three: Identify the assets we have to accomplish our goals and the obstacles that we will need to overcome to reach our vision.
- Step Four: Choose the key areas that we will focus on to begin the work to realize our vision.

Third Meeting: April 2014

- Step Five: Form work teams to address our key area.
- Step Six: Develop goals and an action plan and establish measures to gauge our progress.

The meetings were planned on weekends to accommodate working families with food, childcare, and translation provided to make participation possible and fun. But it seemed like a gamble and no one was sure that we would be able to attract enough people willing to commit three Saturday mornings to this effort.

The group prepared a one-page handout describing its plan for launching Santa Rosa Together, talking points, an outreach list of 120 key community leaders, and got to work with the one-on-one contacts. The outreach list was divided into community

sectors and a goal of at least ten community members from each sector was set.

City government continued with its policy of not supporting or participating in this effort. The city's civic engagement coordinator was allowed to attend the meetings as an observer only. Other city staffers were told that they could not participate in the work or the meetings.

> The Andy Lopez tragedy further demonstrated the need to create a voice in the city that could articulate and work toward a new kind of government and citizen relationship.

During the course of the effort to launch Santa Rosa Together, a very significant community tragedy occurred that had a major impact on this work. On October 22, Andy Lopez, a 16-year-old Latino youth who was carrying a toy gun was shot and killed by a Sonoma County Sheriff's deputy in one of the unincorporated areas of the city. This tragedy began a long, still ongoing, and difficult time of anger, demonstrations, and reflection for the entire community and its governments. This event and its aftermath quickly became the main focus for the entire community. In this new context, the coalition considered postponing its November meeting and reconsidering its approach. After discussion, the group decided to move ahead with its plans and work, recognizing that the work to rebuild and strengthen the way we work together in the city and transform the way that our governments partner with organized community members would be a key to preventing such tragedies in the future. The Andy Lopez tragedy further demonstrated the need to create a voice in the city that could articulate and work toward a new kind of government and citizen relationship. It would not be until a year later that the coalition would have the strength and organizational capacity to participate directly in the work to improve engagement on key issues, like the Andy Lopez tragedy, facing the city.

In this context, the first meeting of Santa Rosa Together, held on November 16, 2013, at Cook Middle School, got the effort to launch Santa Rosa

Together off to a good start. A diverse group of 85 community members representing all sectors of the city attended. After introductions and an explanation of the goals and purpose of the meeting, everyone met in small groups with representatives of different sectors in each group to get to know each other, share experiences, and develop a common understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of our city's ability to engage residents and work together.

The following two meetings followed a similar format. On February 1, 2014, about 65 people reconvened to develop a common vision for our city's democracy and to identify and prioritize actions that we could take to move toward this vision over the next year. Two months later, on April 12, the group met again to form action teams and develop a plan to work on the priority actions. Over 160 community members participated in one or more of these meetings to launch Santa Rosa Together.

All the resources to organize and hold these meetings came from the volunteers on the Planning Committee and the organizations they represented. The Santa Rosa School District and Cook Middle School provided the meeting place and support for refreshments. Planning committee members each contributed up to $20.00 to cover the cost of childcare and translation for the meetings. Food was donated by the school and by the planning committee members. Easels and flip charts came from the Health Department; equipment for simultaneous translation came from St. Joseph's Health System; the Community Action Partnership provided the sound system; round tables for small group discussions were lent by Salvation Army; table facilitators were recruited from the planning committee and from Sonoma State University; youth club members helped with registration; and, finally, everyone on the Planning Committee helped with setup and cleanup.

The 160 people who attended one or more of these meetings represented a diverse cross section of the community. One experienced community leader described the meetings as the most diverse she had ever attended in our city. But, there were some weaknesses in representation: the number of business representatives was low and even though

the outreach and meetings brought new grass roots community members to the effort, representation of typically under-represented groups including Latinos was also low.

With the completion of the April 16 meeting, the Santa Rosa Together Planning Committee felt that they had achieved most of their goals. The meetings pulled together a broad coalition of organizations and community leaders committed to creating better politics in the city. The new organization had created a shared vision to guide its work and it had succeeded in identifying actions and forming teams to move its work forward. This seemed to everyone like a strong start of a long-term effort that had the potential to make a real difference for Santa Rosa.

Here is the shared vision developed by Santa Rosa Together:

- Santa Rosa has a strong democratic culture of mutual respect, dialogue, and inclusion that has improved our city's ability to work together and address concerns. Everyone's voice and contribution are valued and encouraged and our mutual respect for each other supports our efforts to find common ground. All segments of our community are equally valued, fully engaged, and playing leading roles in the development of a strong and healthy city. Santa Rosa is known across the world for it democratic institutions and culture.
- A large number of city residents are organized and actively engaged in setting the direction and doing the work to create a great city. We are a city with a strong foundation of organized neighborhoods and communities where we get to know each other, take responsibility, and learn how to work together and take action to build strong communities and a strong city.
- Governments and elected officials understand the importance of broad community engagement, support the organization of residents, and partner with residents and their organizations to make important decisions and to accomplish shared goals.
- Our city's business, religious, and social organizations contribute resources and services to support resident engagement and partner with residents and their organization to accomplish shared goals.
- Santa Rosa has developed and institutionalized creative new ways to make it easier for citizens to become informed, learn from each other, and participate meaningfully in the decisions and work that will shape our city. Our new ways of engaging people give them real power and responsibility and bring the decision process and work to our neighborhoods, schools, and churches to make it possible for everyone to participate meaningfully.

It took several months following the third meeting in April to finalize a realistic action plan. Several attempts to form action teams to follow up on actions identified at the meetings were unsuccessful. The Coalition Steering Committee soon realized that the number of volunteers with the time and experience needed to lead teams was still limited. By the summer, the steering committee and team leaders consolidated around an action plan that was focused and in line with the resources available to the organization. Here is the first action plan with the teams and actions finally settled on in July 2014:

Santa Rosa Together First Action Plan

Schools team will work with Santa Rosa School District to help the common core teams that will meet in the fall to include civic engagement as a central part of the new curriculum

Government team will actively support and work with the Open Government Task Force to help them develop recommendations for civic engagement

Citizen engagement team will work to help ensure that the annexation of Roseland is done in a way that promotes trust across the city and to ensure that the residents of Roseland have a strong and organized voice in the annexation process

Cross sector team will create an opportunity for the different sectors of the city to come together and get to know each other and begin to build the trust we need to work together.

Steering committee will organize a speaker series to bring information from across the country to Santa Rosa about the best practices for improving engagement and the ability to work together so that we can learn from other cities that are doing work similar to ours. In addition to bringing information on best practices to the city, we will use these events as an opportunity for members of Santa Rosa Together to get together and share experiences.

Early in 2014, as the work to launch Santa Rosa Together proceeded, the Santa Rosa City Council organized an Open Government Task Force to find ways to improve the transparency of government operations. This taskforce was created in response to several incidents, including the city's initial reaction to the Andy Lopez shooting, which had been widely criticized for its lack of transparency. The taskforce was made up of citizens appointed by the council. It was chaired by two members of the council with a strong interest in Open Government. This taskforce encouraged community input and made it clear that it understood its mission was to include the development of recommendations for community engagement. As a result, the Santa Rosa Together Government Committee worked closely with the taskforce to help it shape its recommendations for improving community engagement. This work became a main focus for Santa Rosa Together through the summer and fall of 2014.

The steering committee also began the work to organize the first speaker of its planned speaker series designed to "bring the best practices in civic engagement and local democracy to Santa Rosa from around the world." The steering committee managed to get Matt Leighninger, Executive Director of the Deliberative Democracy Coalition, to speak in Santa Rosa on September 25. Matt agreed to talk on a topic directly relevant to the work in Santa Rosa: "The Next Form of Democracy, How Citizens and Government Are Building New Partnerships and Moving Beyond Adversity."

2014 was also an election year for city council, and, over the summer and fall, council campaigns were the focus of city politics. In keeping with its commitment to nonpartisanship, Santa Rosa Together did not endorse candidates, but two members of

Santa Rosa Together were running for city council. And, steering committee members also met with other council candidates to explain Santa Rosa Together and ask for their support. This outreach was more effective as the work over the past year had convinced most community leaders that Santa Rosa Together really was "a broad nonpartisan coalition of community leaders working to get more people engaged, give everyone a voice and role, and improve the way we work together in Santa Rosa."

The council election campaigns also seemed to take on a new tone, with respectful debates and a general agreement on the importance of finding common ground. When the new council took office in December, a new mayor and vice mayor representing the two different sides of the traditional council split were elected as a sign of a more collaborative approach to council business. The new vice-mayor had participated in the meetings to launch Santa Rosa Together.

In addition, a new city manager started work for the city in the fall. The council election, the work of the Open Government Task Force, the new city manager, and our first speaker all contributed to create new and significantly better conditions for the work of Santa Rosa Together. In the fall of 2014, there were several clear signs that the political landscape in the city was beginning to change. First, the city decided, partly as a result of input from the new city manager, to partner with Santa Rosa Together to cosponsor the first speaker of our planned speaker series. As a result, on September 25, the speaker's presentation was held at city hall in City Council Chambers. For the first time, a large number of city staff attended and the speaker was able to meet with members of the Open Government Task Force following his presentation. Task force members and city staff both thanked Santa Rosa Together for organizing the presentation and bringing a valuable perspective to the city. The presentation could not have come at a better time for the city and the work of Santa Rosa Together. As a speaker from outside the city with a broad knowledge of the work to rebuild local democracy across the nation, Matt was able to validate and add credibility to the work to create a different kind of politics in Santa Rosa. Matt also met separately for a discussion with members of the Santa Rosa Together Steering Committee

and that conversation was especially important in helping to build the steering committee's confidence in their work.

In early December 2014, Santa Rosa Together played a strong role in the discussion of the Open Government Task Force report when it was presented to the city council. Santa Rosa Together was able to raise important ideas and present a clear plan for implementation of the Task Force recommendations. It was clear at this council meeting that the new city council and city manager appreciated and welcomed the input from Santa Rosa Together.

Shortly after this council discussion, members of the steering committee met with the city staff from the Santa Rosa City Manager's Office to clarify and consolidate the partnership with the city and to plan for the next speaker scheduled for early January. It was clear from this meeting that Santa Rosa Together was now viewed by the city as a valuable partner in a joint effort to strengthen the partnership between the city and its residents.

On January 12 2015, Paul Leistner from Portland's Office of Neighborhood Involvement visited Santa Rosa as the second speaker in the speaker series. This time Paul was able to present first at City Hall for city staff and then again in the evening at a city community center for community members. Over 100 city staffers, including managers from most city departments, attended Paul's presentation at City Hall and about an equal number of community members joined Paul for his evening presentation. In addition, the new city manager met with Paul one-on-one for an hour. Paul's presentations and meetings in Santa Rosa reinforced the work to rebuild local democracy and shared all the lessons learned from the Portland long-term efforts to do the same.

Further evidence of the city's new partnership with Santa Rosa Together came with the city's invitation to Santa Rosa Together to send a member to participate with the interviews of candidates for the job of Santa Rosa Chief of Police. In addition, following the city council's decision to create the new senior-level position for the city of Director of Community Engagement, the city manager invited Santa Rosa Together to work with the city to help write the job description for this new position.

At the end of February, the Santa Rosa Together Steering Committee, with new members joining in response to the new opportunities, held a Saturday afternoon retreat to develop a plan for work based on all of the new developments and opportunities. The group of 12 met and decided to focus on two priorities: first, to continue to work with the city to implement the recommendations of the Open Government Task Force and build the capacity of the city to engage and partner with community members, and, second, to work in the southwest area of the city to ensure that its residents have a strong and organized voice in the annexation process and planning that the city and county were beginning in that part of the city.

The committees responsible for the work on these priorities were both able to recruit new members so that the work on the action plan that was developed over the previous year finally began in earnest. Most importantly, Santa Rosa Together now has the resources and partners to work at both the city level and at the neighborhood level. This means that Santa Rosa Together will now be able to engage activists who are used to working at the city level in city politics as well as community leaders working at the neighborhood and block levels. This work will give Santa Rosa Together a chance to keep its commitment to give everyone a voice and role in the city and to build an organization that has the diversity to practice the kind of democracy that it is working to create. The group of volunteers working in southwest Santa Rosa includes both community leaders and organizations with deep ties in the community, and so it has the potential to help engage community members and help create an organization that will give residents in southwest Santa Rosa a strong and organized voice. The city staff working on annexation and planning are also committed to developing community engagement and they have put together a community steering committee with 50 members to help lead their efforts.

As the Santa Rosa Together Steering Committee members at the Saturday retreat looked back on the work that began two years earlier to form a nonpartisan organization to improve the way people worked together in the city and the previous three years work to build a better partnership between neighborhoods and the city, they were amazed and

surprised at the progress they had made. And they were excited about the possibilities for change that might now be possible with the city as a partner. Everyone agreed that the amazing progress had resulted from the ability to express and give a voice to the widespread desire to create a democracy that gives everyone a voice and role in the city.

Summarizing Some Lessons Learned

1. Perhaps, most importantly, the experience in Santa Rosa demonstrates that it is possible to make the state of local democracy itself an issue for the community. In Santa Rosa, the state of the city's democracy has proven to be a strongly motivating issue in every part of our community. Many of our residents are concerned about our cities' politics and feel strongly that it needs to be improved. Many are worried that special interests now overwhelm their voice, that politics has become too adversarial, and that we no longer have the ability to find the common ground to address important challenges facing the city. The work in Santa Rosa also demonstrates that democracy is still a widely held ideal in our society and that we do know what we are missing and can recognize democracy in practice when we see it. Most importantly, Santa Rosa demonstrates that people have not given up on improving our democracy and, when given the opportunity, will come together with enthusiasm to do the work needed to rebuild democracy.

2. From the beginning it was clear that talking about this work in terms of democracy or strengthening democracy had little meaning for our community members. We have lost a common understanding of what we mean by this term, so talking about how to improve it did not get us very far. We spent a lot of time over the years in our meetings talking about this issue and working to find a more concrete way to talk about democracy and to articulate the widespread concern for our politics. This work to find the best way to describe our work so that it articulates the concerns of our community was crucial. After multiple iterations and experiences, we settled on a more concrete language to describe this work that seems to have been successful in articulating these concerns. Currently, we use this as our short description of our organization and its goals: "Santa

Rosa Together is a diverse and nonpartisan group of volunteer community leaders working together to get more citizens engaged, give everyone a voice and role, and improve the way we work together in the city." We have also found that talking about building community resonates with many people and that this concept is now used to express many, if not all, of the values of a strong local democracy, including respecting and trusting each other, taking responsibility for each other and working together. So we often talk about "building a strong and healthy community" to describe our work. We have also described our local democracy as our city-wide community where we all, every part of our diverse community, come together to create a strong and healthy city.

3. Connecting these more concrete and accessible descriptions of our work to democracy is helping us create a new shared understanding of this term and strengthen our work by connecting us to our powerful democratic traditions. The following is a more detailed description of our work that makes the link to our democratic history:

   We believe that our ability to meet our challenges and create a great city depends ultimately on our ability to engage and tap the talents of all of our citizens, find common ground, and work together. We are concerned that too many of our citizens feel like they do not have a voice and role in the city. We are concerned that our governments and community institutions are not doing enough to support and partner with citizens and their organizations. We are concerned that not enough of us, as citizens, are engaged and taking responsibility for our neighborhoods and city. And, we are concerned that our politics, following broader national trends, has become more adversarial and that we are losing our ability to find the common ground we need to move forward. All of us would prefer a better way to work together, but we have too often taken the current way of doing things as a given. We formed Santa Rosa Together because we are convinced that we can and need to do better. We formed Santa

Rosa together not because we have all the answers, but because we believe that if we work together we can find a way to create a democracy in our city that comes closer to our ideals, a democracy that works to include everyone in the decisions and work of the city.

4. We found that creating a separate organization to take up this work was important in our city. Most of the current organizations in the city were seen as representing only a part of the community or a particular point of view. Creating a nonpartisan coalition focused only on improving the way we work together in the city, which made it possible for community leaders from all sectors of the community to join the work. It took a long time to convince everyone that Santa Rosa Together was truly nonpartisan, but once we had demonstrated our independence and our focus, community leaders from all sides joined the organization. Without a clearly independent organization, this would not have happened. Creating an organization open to all sectors of the community also demonstrated that we were not focused on blaming one sector for the problems with our politics and that we knew that change would be needed on all sides to create a better way to work together. A broad coalition with an open invitation to community leaders at all levels also gave a concrete expression to the idea that the work to improve local democracy is everyone's responsibility. It also helped us to get support by creating an organization that recognized that everyone was already engaged in important work on other issues and that our organization would complement that work by providing a place for everyone to come together to work on the basic democratic infrastructure of the city.

5. It is very important for the group of citizens leading this effort to be flexible and be willing to learn from its experiences and change course as necessary to meet the needs of the community. It may help to start this work by focusing on an immediate and pressing concern about democracy and then broaden the work gradually to include all aspects of the work to strengthen local democracy. For example, the work in Santa Rosa began with neighborhood leaders working to demand that neighborhoods have a stronger

voice in the city and a better partnership with city government and then expanded to Santa Rosa Together.

6. Creating an organization that models the kind of democratic practice that we are looking for and is representative of all parts of our community are essential parts of the work. A lot of our credibility in Santa Rosa is based on the fact that we have demonstrated, in practice, by the way we work together that we are committed to our democratic vision. Creating spaces in our meetings for people from different sectors to meet and get to know each other, providing time for building relationships, treating everyone equally from elected officials to block leaders, working to ensure that all parts of our city are included and represented, providing translation, making meetings accessible to families, trying to make meetings and work fun and satisfying—all have been an essential part of our work. This democratic practice and our commitment to including everyone remained as the foundation and enabled us to change tactics in our methods without losing our credibility.

7. We found that one-on-one conversations and building relationships was the only method that worked to build this work—this work cannot be explained with a leaflet. We have no shared language and not enough trust to do without face-to-face conversation. We must have had hundreds, maybe thousands, of these conversations over the course of the last five years.

8. To really get this work going, we needed to work together to create a shared vision for the kind of democracy we were trying to create. The creation of this shared vision became the basis for all of our work. We also needed to create an action plan that could identify the concrete steps we would take to work toward our vision. This action plan with its more immediate goals gives us the ability to include more and more community leaders as they become familiar with our work through concrete actions that affect them directly. This is especially important for including underrepresented community leaders who have not yet been reached.

9. It was important for all of us to understand that this work to build civic capacity will require a long-term effort. Understanding this and taking a step-by-step approach to the work has been the key to making this work sustainable.

10. We found that the volunteers needed to work on improving local politics were available in our city and were looking for the opportunity to address this fundamental part of our community. Here is where the volunteers came from to start this effort:

    a. Community leaders who feel they do not have a voice in the city including neighborhood leaders, leaders of under-represented communities, and youth;

    b. Government staff involved with public outreach, especially from the public health field, including gang prevention, redevelopment, and outreach staff;

    c. Church leaders interested in working in and building community;

    d. Local business leaders focused on community and the local economy;

    e. NGOs working with underrepresented communities;

    f. Political leaders who have become unhappy with current politics and who would like to see the kind of politics that is more consistent with their democratic values.

11. It has taken a persistent, focused, and long-term effort to ensure that Santa Rosa Together is representative of the community. While Santa Rosa Together might be one of the most diverse organizations in the city, we still have a long way to go to fully include youth, minority communities, renters, and other unrepresented parts of our city. This work has to be the focus of the action plan and the work to include each sector of the city requires its own outreach effort and volunteers. As part of this effort, it was important for Santa Rosa Together to recognize and talk about the tension between focusing on improving the way we work together in the city and giving everyone a voice and role in the city. Both are essential, but leaders already engaged in city politics found it easy to focus on building collaboration among current city leaders and more difficult to broaden engagement at the block and neighborhood levels. Neighborhood-, community-, and block-level organizing are the only ways to go beyond current political activists and broader engagement, but doing this work with volunteers was not easy.

Creating an action plan that included work to help residents in one of the underrepresented parts of the city organize to have a strong voice was key to making progress on the work to broaden engagement.

12. Over the course of these five years, we relied on a small core group of about ten leaders to sustain this work. In Santa Rosa, this leadership came mostly from a small group of community leaders working as volunteers on their own time including neighborhood and church leaders, NGO leaders, and government staff. Several retired government staffers played key roles in this work. Developing and maintaining this core leadership group was a key to sustaining this work. This is the group that kept going during transitions and changes in direction. They were able to maintain the momentum and keep the opportunity open for the large numbers of residents interested in improving our local democracy.

13. While some political leaders will support this effort at the start, we also found that many of the most active political leaders in the city were not the first to join this effort. These leaders are experienced politicians who have learned how to function in the current adversarial politics. They had a hard time believing that Santa Rosa Together was not just another political strategy for winning in the next election. Each side suspected that our broad coalition, with members from sectors that they opposed, was a cover for the interests of their opponents. Given their close experience with current politics, these leaders are also very skeptical about the possibility of creating a different kind of politics. They saw the goals of Santa Rosa Together as idealistic and unattainable—a diversion from the real political struggle for power. Current political practices and the approach of Santa Rosa Together represent two very different paradigms, and it is not easy for leaders engaged in the current politics to understand and support an entirely different approach to politics.

14. Given the commitment of many in our community to the current politics and government practices, efforts to strengthen local democracy can expect opposition. In Santa Rosa, this mostly took the form of ignoring our work,

labeling it as politically motivated or unrealistic. For some time, our city government leaders opposed our work, feeling that our efforts were focused unfairly on them. At other times they viewed Santa Rosa Together as a disguised partisan effort focused on council elections. As a result, for a period of time, city staff was told not to participate in our meetings. In addition, many of the main players in local politics, including business and environmental groups, ignored our work as irrelevant to the real political struggle in the city. Our only recourse in this situation was to start with all those who were ready to begin work on creating a better politics and gradually convince more people that a different kind of politics was possible.

15. Having city government and elected officials as partners in the work to strengthen local democracy is a key to progress. Government is, or should be, the most important vehicle for involving citizens and working together in the city. Given its key role in the city, the work to strengthen local democracy will make slow progress without government as a partner. So, getting the government to partner with this work is a priority. Once this partnership has been built and the resources of our government can be used, the work will go much faster.

16. Bringing in ideas from other cities is very helpful. To accomplish this, Santa Rosa Together sponsors an ongoing speaker series to bring the best practices in civic engagement and local democracy to Santa Rosa from around the world. These speakers, four so far, have been very helpful in bringing new ideas to the city and providing encouragement for everyone engaged in this work.

17. Here are some thoughts on the possible implications of our work for activists working to strengthen our democracy:

   a. We should consider focusing more effort on the work to rebuild at the local level. This work can provide the basis for broader efforts to rebuild democracy.

   b. The work on developing democratic methods, skills, and tools (e.g., participatory budgeting, small group facilitation, internet forums) while great is not sufficient; we also need to help build the democratic context—the local democracies that can incorporate these methods and tools.

   c. Activists working to improve democracy have the potential to be a great resource for this work but only if they are willing to make a long-term commitment to participation in the work in a local community to rebuild democracy.

   d. We need to find ways to recruit and support leaders for these local efforts working with all potential sources for leaders including local governments, health departments, educational institutions, businesses, retirees, local foundations, community, and neighborhood leaders, etc.

   e. We need to rely on local and creative ways to maintain this work; there are very few sources of funding and support for this work at the national level.

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