Healthy Community Approach

“This we know – The Earth does not belong to man – man belongs to the Earth. This we know. All things are connected like the blood which unites one family. All things are connected. Whatever befalls the Earth befalls the sons of the Earth. Man does not weave the web of life – he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.”

– Chief Seattle, 1854

One of the key concepts in community development is the idea of holism, the looking at the whole of things and seeing all the various elements, components, systems and processes of a community or community effort. It looks at all the pieces, how they fit together, and how each piece affects the others. It is a conceptual tool of being able to see the entirety of something and ensure that when one task is undertaken, it is understood how it will affect everything else. This is holistic community development.

The web of community is a way to look at how a community fits together. It is a conceptual tool to see the patterns, processes and interactions and how all the different elements of a community fit together and interconnect. When something happens in a community the web is a way to see that it affects everything else. When one strand of a web is “tweaked,” it vibrates the whole web. The same is true of a web of community; affect one strand of the web and everything else is affected.

The visual of the web and the succeeding elements evolve and change over time. The web of every community is different. The makeup of the web can change depending on a community. What is offered here is a generic web that describes the basic elements of the web of any community. This is meant as an evolving conceptual tool to help a community understand how it fits and works together, not as a static model that fits every community.

BASIC COMPONENTS OF A HEALTHY COMMUNITY

Holism incorporates all the elements of community efforts, including:

- Basic community development concepts and principles
- Community discovery approach
- Managing community change
- Capacity development
- Leadership development
- Local ownership and control – community driven
- Local knowledge
- Baseline for community measures/indicators of community health
- Focuses on the “good and healthy” and works toward a common vision/dream
- Process-designed and implemented locally
- Healthy community defined by community – every community is different and unique
- Proactive and preventative Inclusive and participatory
- Web of Community
B. COMMUNITY DISCOVERY
The process of community discovery is a way for a community to take an in-depth look at itself. This is accomplished through the web of community, a dynamic and ever-evolving approach to provide a comprehensive, holistic, integrated way to help a community learn about itself. The web will be discussed in more detail later, but it is a visual tool to help a community see how all...
its different parts and aspects fit together and how each part affects all other parts and aspects of a community.

The process of community discovery is an approach to help communities constantly learn about themselves. A community can look at its parts, interactions, systems, intangibles, energy, resources, and its patterns and processes. People can put their community together in a holistic way to not only understand the what, but also the why.

The process will help a community to evaluate its systems and functions on an everyday basis. But this needs to be done in the context of its definition of a strong community.

This strong community definition will provide the baseline for a community to measure the impacts, types, rates, and causes of change.

The process of community discovery will allow for the knowledgeable management of community change by proactive capacity building, using appropriate community development tools, and working through all its aspects.

Every community should have the opportunity to manage its future to preserve the good and enhance the less good and have access to tools and skills that provide the understanding needed to best do this.

The idea is to create a method of preventative medicine for communities.

**Some aspects of Community Discovery are:**

- Culture
- Arts
- Values/Beliefs
- Stories
- Architecture
- Energy
- Communication Networks
- Sense of Place
- Sense of Community
- Community Systems
- Information About Your Community
- History
- Governance
- Dreams/Hopes/Visions
- Community Dynamics
- Patterns/Processes

Community discovery is a process of looking at your community in a new and different way, seeing the positives, recognizing the changes taking place and using those discoveries to guide your community into the future in an exciting way to move forward.

**C. COMMUNITY CHANGE**

Communities are constantly undergoing change. Generally change is slow and incremental, and a community’s capacity to manage change is not tested. The processes of accommodation and
acculturation incorporate the incremental changes into a community with minimal fuss and disruption.

The ability of a community to create, sustain, and implement the capacities needed to manage the changes that have taken place has been tested to the limit. A key to having healthy communities in rural Alaska will be their ability to adapt to and manage change in a way that preserves the good of a community, while taking advantage of the new that fits within the community’s definition of a healthy community. Understanding the generators of change and the tools available to manage change is a key component of keeping a community healthy.

Process
Generally, the process of asking the community the following three questions helps it to understand what is taking place.

1. What are the changes you have seen take place in your lifetime?
2. What has generated these changes?
3. What can be done to mitigate these changes?

Community Change Results in Changes to:
- Community values
- Demands for service
- Infrastructure needs
- Leadership
- Cultural outlook
- Population/demographic
- Economic base
- Local business mix
- Physical appearance
- Energy needs
- Local communication networks
- Civic virtues
- Dreams/hopes/vision
- Community functions

Community Change Also Generates:
- Needs for capacities to manage change
- Stress on existing community capacities
- Disruptions in community governance

Managing Community Change
“Every person’s opinion is fact to them.” This observation has been made many times over the years. In order to manage change, people’s attitudes and beliefs have to be changed. This is a very difficult task at times. But there are some general observations about how people change their minds and awaken to changes occurring around them. The first step to managing change is to be aware that it is happening.

A simple change adoption process is:
1. Create awareness of what is happening
2. Develop interest in the changes occurring
3. Give people a chance to objectively evaluate changes that are occurring
4. Let people understand the nature of the changes that are occurring
5. Create a safe way to adapt to the changes taking place.
A way to help adapt to the change is to communicate that the change can:
1. Create positive chances to be innovative
2. Be a chance to disseminate new information
3. Legitimize new ways of doing things
4. Be integrated into community ways of doing
5. Reinforce core community values

Be aware that beliefs, values, personal needs, and attitudes can be affected by habits, social norms, and expected behaviors, and all of these affect the behavior in relation to change. Mitigating change is personal as well as community oriented. Community members will not be willing to even address changes unless they are comfortable with the change adoption process.

Strategies that can help do this are:
1. Change existing beliefs and values in non-confrontational ways
2. Determine the new needs and aspirations that change presents and approach them in a positive, proactive way
3. Use community norms and values to influence citizens
4. Help people understand the generators of change and the factors associated with that change

Use all available communication and information sources to disseminate an understanding of the changes occurring, possible results of that change, and ways to positively manage and mitigate community change.

**Community Change Praadox**

“Change is the Only Constant in the Universe” – Albert Einstein

“Only a Baby With a Messy Diaper Likes Change” – Mark Twain

This is part of the problem with community change. It is always happening, but most people want to have little to do with it.

**Elements of the web of community**

-Parts of a Community-
Every community is somewhere. It exists in a physical setting and has physical parts. Just like a human body, a community has parts that make it up. These parts include:

- The **biosphere** is all the various living things in a community. Those resources that nature has provided that allow us to live and the various natural resources from which we derive the things we need to produce the physical components of a community. The plant and animal biota that make up our community.

- The **physical properties** are what provide the site and geography where a community is sited. The land, water and air we breathe. The landscape that makes up the scenery and geography in which we live. The mineral and other physical resources that provide the building blocks of a community. Connection to place is a critical element that shapes a community, and available resources determine its viability and sustainability in that special place that a community exists. Resources, waterways, natural travel ways and other physical factors have often determined why a community arose in a certain place.

- **Man-made constructions** are other essential components of the parts of our community. The various infrastructures, our homes, buildings, dams, ports, railways, highways and all the physical things we build and use in our
communities are all essential parts of our community and help shape its character. Man-made landmarks, historic buildings and other well-known buildings and constructions often define and determine community identity.

- **Mental connections** including communication networks, ways of governance, and the ways in which we relate to one another are essential components of any community.
- **Emotional aspects** including community attitudes, feelings, pride and other aspects make up a critical part of any community.
- **Spiritual concerns** are just as integral to our communities as they are to us as individuals. Our beliefs, values and view of the greater world and universe determine a great deal of how we function as a community.

Recognizing key community parts and their importance in creating, maintaining and sustaining community viability help a community decide how to use, manage and protect these elements that are critical to its makeup and future.

**Interactions in a Community**

Every community is a wealth of rich and diverse community interactions. It is our human interactions that are the core of human community. Without interaction, there is no community. These interactions take place in all the various parts of a community, between the people of a community, with other communities, and form the social structure of a community.

These interactions help create the patterns, processes, and how the web is woven. They are the lifeblood and circulatory system of a community. They help determine the uniqueness and personality of a community. They are how things are done in a community. Understanding community interactions is a key to understanding how to manage and direct change in ways to help keep the community healthy.

To tinker with community interactions without understanding them is a good way to disrupt essential community functions. Identifying and interconnecting community interactions help to better understand how a community really functions.

There are many types of community interactions. Some of the basic ones include:

- Educational – how we learn
- Social – how we interact as human beings
- Political – how we govern ourselves
- Cultural – how we live everyday life
- Economic – how we make our livelihoods
- Recreational – how we play together
- Spiritual – how we connect in our faith
- Environmental – how we relate to the natural world
- Interpersonal – how we relate to each other
- Helping – how we help one another
- Sharing – how we share with one another

Take the time to identify and analyze and understand the different interactions in your community. These interactions are the strands of the web that connect the pieces of the web together. Unhealthy interactions can produce weak strands and a weak web. If community decisions weaken local interactions, the web can fray and weaken.
Community Resources
Resources of a community provide us with the assets, skills and capacities we need to be a productive and viable community. There are many kinds of resources but we will focus on two major types:

- **Physical resources** are those mentioned in the first section of the web in physical part. The biota, minerals, land, water and air that provide community parts are also the building blocks of resources that provide the community what it needs to survive and thrive. Remove any key physical resources and a community will find it hard to function well. If you remove the essential building blocks of a human being, it will struggle to stay healthy and alive. This is the same for a human community. Protecting and preserving physical resources is essential to community health.

- **Community capacities** are those non-physical things a community has to help it perform basic community functions. Capacities are those skills, assets, and resources needed by a community to be able to perform the functions to make a community healthy and for it to be home. Five basic types of capacities as described earlier are:
  - Individual
  - Family
  - Organizational
  - Community
  - Leadership

The following list is not organized according to the five basic types of capacities. Some may fit in all five, while others may just fit in one or more. Not complete by any means, but the list will give you an idea of the kind of community assets and skills a community needs to have the capacities needed to create and sustain a healthy community. Some basic community development capacities include:

- Community development practice
- Group development, organization and management
- Building partnerships
- Facilitation
- Grassroots organizing
- Community analysis / needs assessment
- Administration and management
- Leadership
- Evaluation and monitoring
- Cross-cultural communication
- Oral communications
- Written communication
- Economic sustainability
- Project and program planning
- Grant writing
- Fiscal management
- Conflict resolution
- Building community institutions
- Technology
- Training
Community Energy
A community needs energy to function just like a person does. But it also needs appropriate energy. If a community wants to be a couch potato community, it needs couch potato energy. If it wants to be a marathon runner community, it needs marathon runner energy. If we eat the wrong amounts and kinds of foods, we will not be healthy. The same is true for community energy.

Community energy includes:

- **The human spirit.** One person can make a difference and a whole community of people can make all the difference. Measuring the human spirit of a person or community is not easily done, but we all know it when we see it, or the lack thereof. The human spirit is not a measurable phenomenon. Yet it is one of the key elements of community energy. We all know it when we see it and also when it is not there. It is possibly the most important part of community energy. How to discern and catalog a community’s human spirit is one of the mysteries of the community web. Some things are just not quantifiable or easily explained. But every community knows intuitively the state of the grit and gumption of its people. They also know its importance to getting things done. Without this invisible energy, little is accomplished.

- **Vision / dreams / hopes.** Thomas Jefferson said, “Without a vision the people will perish”. Casey Stengel said, “If you don’t know where you are going, you most probably won’t get there”. It is our common dreams, hopes, and visions that fuel the healthy community efforts. There are many visioning formats and ways to do community visioning. Having a vision, a desired end condition is paramount to a community’s success. Visioning will be addressed in more detail later in this book, but a common vision, common aspirations and common dreams are necessary parts of the web of community.

- **The economy.** The economy is the lifeblood of a community. It is how people in a community create wealth, earn a living, and can afford to have the things that are important to them in life. But having the kind of economy that creates supports and sustains community health is most important. Creating economic activities that destroy or weaken other parts of the web may do more harm than good in the long run. Industrial development may not be a good source of energy for communities which want an agrarian lifestyle. Community economies should fit in the web of a community. Community economies should provide appropriate sustainable energy for a community. Ways to do that will be looked at later in this book.

Community Intangibles
One of the best things about any community are the intangibles that make a community unique, that create community pride and are what we think about when we think of home. The intangibles are the unspoken and undefined aspects of a community that are rarely addressed, but always there.

Many intangibles of community make up some of the essential parts of the web, including:

- The sense of community – what brings us all together
- Sense of place – why the place we live is so special
- Civic virtue – the concept of giving to your community as a virtue of living
- Local culture – the uniqueness of the local culture that creates the richness of life
- Values / beliefs – those things that bind a community together and guide how we all live together, what we all share in common
• Personality – those unique traits and characteristics that give a community its originality and identity
• Sense of belonging – why you feel at home

These intangibles are what make life fun and interesting and create common bonds in a community. If altered in unhealthy ways, they can destroy the very fabric of community life.

The intangibles are what give the web its strength and vibrancy. They are also part of what gives each community web its unique pattern and design. The intangibles make up the beauty of the web. Intangibles create community pride and the sense of belonging, possibly the most important intangible of all.

HOME – The Heart and Soul of Community
This is what you want not to change in your community. It is what makes your community the unique place that you call HOME. The HOME is what cannot be taken away without ruining the essence of your community. This is the most important aspect of any community. Yet we, or others, make community decisions all the time without ever considering what effect they will have on the HOME. Organizations have missions, but we hardly ever take the time to discover and articulate the most essential ingredients of any community.

The HOME of a community is generally known to all, but rarely put in a way that helps guide a community through the maze of decisions necessary to create and maintain health. This should be simple. Determine what is not to be changed and monitor every decision that you make and implement against its effect on the Home. If the HOME is disturbed, then change your course of action.

One method of determining the essence of your HOME is a very simple community exercise. Ask community members four simple questions:
1. What are your favorite things to do in your community?
2. Where are your favorite places to go in your community?
3. What are the favorite reasons why you live in your community?
4. What is the glue of your community; what makes it home?

Then ask what it is about these answers that make your community home?

Community Patterns and Processes
Community patterns arise from what we do in everyday life in our communities. The patterns of community life determine how many of the elements of the web are addressed and conducted. Identifying community patterns is a key to seeing how a community conducts everyday affairs. The patterns give the web its shape and form. The patterns are integral to the uniqueness of every community’s web. When something happens that changes community patterns, it can drastically affect every other part of the web, so be careful and thoughtful in doing so.

Community processes are how things get done in a community. It is how decisions are made, resources allocated. They are the base of community interactions, and are at the heart of community intangibles. Every community has its ways of doing, ways of being, its unique day-to-day ways of things getting done that underlie all that happens in a community.

“That's just how things are done around here” is a familiar phrase heard in every community. Be careful upsetting the “way things are done” in a community as that can dramatically affect everything else that happens. Community processes give depth to a web and provide the
“invisible and unseen” things that are essential to anything getting done in a community. It can be the one thing that can unravel the web quicker than anything.

Community patterns and processes are the basic ingredients that make up community systems, and are the foundation of everyday life in a community.

**Community Systems**

The systems approach has become much more relevant to communities and their development as the holistic view of communities has emerged. There are many definitions and models of systems approach. For purposes of the community discovery approach, systems will be defined here as: Processes and structures that connect and tie a community together to provide the day-to-day functions of that community.

These systems can be formal or informal. Many of our social and civil institutions are the forms that have grown out of the structures and processes of the functions that manage everyday community life. These forms are the organizations and institutions that provide the essential functions that communities need to survive. Aristotle talked of the basic vessels every community needs in order be fully functional. He thought that there are 42 essential vessels, or functions, that every community needs to have in place in order to operate effectively. Informal systems are just as important but may not be as visible as the formal ones. The gossip line or who uses what berry patches is examples of informal systems. The more visible systems are the formal ones, such as schools and government.

Since most of our systems become institutionalized, they last for a relatively long time. Every system has its own structure and processes for operation and develops maintained relationships among its interdependent parts. But systems also have properties that are irreducible from their whole. Systems cannot be understood by only looking at individual parts.

In his book, *A Systems View of the World*, Laszlo talks of four principles of natural systems that can easily apply to our community systems:

1. Systems are wholes with irreducible properties. The whole cannot be separated from its parts.
2. Systems maintain themselves in a changing environment. They can adapt and change.
3. Systems recreate themselves in response to changes in other systems. They are creative.
4. Systems interface with other systems to create super systems. They can grow and merge.

Laszlo also observes that most human social systems:

1. Are very versatile
2. Tend to change toward more structure and technology
3. Aggregate themselves onto super systems
4. Trend toward growth, differentiation, complexity, and interdependence.

Laszlo also observes that human systems share the characteristics of:

1. Survival
2. Creativity, and
3. Adaptability with natural systems.
A community is a collection of systems that provide a way of organizing our everyday endeavors. These systems should be responsive to change, able to adapt to changing conditions, and be an outgrowth of community interactions and the local environment. Major systems include the natural environment, social, political, economic, and built environment.

A key function of systems is to maintain what is called the homeostatic balance, or to maintain the ever-changing balance in the systems and the community at large. This is the idea that a system is self-maintaining and self-repairing.

In order to have a healthy community, local systems must be responsive to changes in the web. So the process of community discovery in relation to community systems is one that takes time, skill, understanding, and a new way of looking at how communities function.

Systems are the brain and nerve structure of the web. They interconnect everything, provide for decision-making, and governance, and allow for the everyday functions of the community web. Disrupting community systems is a sure way to cause serious illness in a community web and disrupt community health.

The Outside World
Remember:
- Every web has to be someplace; it is physically located in a greater web.
- This outside web can greatly influence what happens to your web. A slamming door can destroy a spider web.
- Everything affects everything else. We are all interconnected.
- Every web is dependent on what happens in outside webs. A community has to build its own web, but be aware of how outside webs can affect you.
- We are all part of the greater web of life and cannot remove ourselves, our communities, and our decisions from it.
- Local decisions must reflect all of this to remain healthy, vibrant, responsive, and strong.

IN CLOSING The Web of Community
The web of community is nothing more than a tool to help a community through its own process of discovery. The web changes every time it is used in a new community or described in a training session. The web should not be seen as a model in which to fit everything, but rather as an approach that allows a community to learn about itself. It is a tool to assist a community in seeing its functions, processes, parts, interactions, interconnections, and how they fit together to make the whole of a community.

Create your own view of the web, make it fit your community, and then use what you have learned as a way to guide your community into the future, make good decisions, and create the capacities you need to manage change and control your own destiny.

References

Dickerson, Adams, Flora, Gulick, Jeanetta, Nakazawa Building A Strong Community; University of Alaska Fairbanks Cooperative Extension, Forthcoming Fall 2013.