

Community Foundation of Grand Forks, East Grand Forks & Region

INNOVATION

Launched in 2018, the inaugural event featured an uninterrupted table spanning 750 feet on one of the busiest streets in Downtown Grand Forks and hosted 717 local guests from different walks of life. In the second year of the event (2019), the Longest Table welcomed 868 guests seated at a 1,250-foot table down the center of University Avenue, an overlooked and underdeveloped corridor connecting the University of North Dakota campus to the heart of downtown.

The Longest Table gathered residents of Grand Forks, ND, to sit down for a free dinner in a welcoming environment with people they may not have known, to foster stronger connections, exchange stories, discuss community challenges, and spur civic innovation.

Can a simple conversation with your neighbors inspire significant change? Is the average person willing to act on their ideas to improve their community? These are questions the Longest Table sought to answer while elevating traditionally underrepresented voices of immigrants, young professionals, and high school and college students.

OUTCOME

The Longest Table has been and will continue to be used as a flexible tool to address pertinent community issues.

In 2018, attendees were asked about their degree of agreement with six statements to gauge their perceptions of the community. After facilitated discussions, attendees responded to the same statements again. Overall, all six statements saw a positive improvement in perception, showing that a simple face-to-face conversation with a neighbor can change our viewpoint and, perhaps, the direction of our future.

In 2019, the Longest Table informed the University Corridor Plan, a much needed study of an overlooked and underdeveloped corridor between campus and downtown. Too often when cities undertake strategic planning that will drastically affect a neighborhood's day-to-day living, public input is minimized. Placing the table down the center of the affected neighborhood not only drew attention to physical opportunities but provided city leaders with perceptions from those that will be most affected.

The results from both surveys were made available in an easy to navigate, publicly accessible database that has been used by public and private entities to inform decision-making. To further give individual residents the opportunity to actualize their ideas for community-wide improvement, the city accepted applications for seed funding to get ideas off the table and into the community.

Nineteen projects received funding. We saw downtown murals by local artists, a nutrition program to enhance the farmer's market, a series of African performances to share cultural experiences, and transportation for home-bound seniors to theatre performances.

EXECUTION

Although a serious undertaking, the dedicated and collaborative core team, consisting of nonprofits and community members, made the Longest Table one of the community's greatest success stories. Planning for each event averaged six months with a high level of detail and organization spread across five subcommittees: logistics, experience, sponsorship, data and marketing.

Primary steps:

1. Create a planning team of committed community organizers representing students, young professionals, and civic leaders from a diverse range of backgrounds.
2. Assemble 150 table captains who will guide conversations around challenges and opportunities related to the corridor.
3. With the help of captains, attract a diverse set of residents, young professionals, and students to gather for a meal and conversation at the Longest Table.
4. Administer a survey to measure perceptions and desired solutions regarding this key connection in the community.

5. Compile and analyze the data, creating an easy to navigate, publicly accessible database.
6. Using our Longest Table planning team, table captains, and other community connections, continue to elevate the data and outcomes to influence civic decision making.
7. Use micro-grants to activate average citizens to see themselves as leaders with a voice who can influence local government and implement solutions.

REPRESENTATION

The Longest Table sought to engage high school and college students, young professionals, and immigrants in important civic conversations. Bringing these voices to the table undoubtedly provided a perspective that often goes unheard. Empowering people from a young age to engage in civic discourse and take on leadership roles will have resounding community effects.

When advertising for the event, we reached out to immigrant groups, homeless shelters, faith communities, schools, and employment agencies that serve those with disabilities. When you looked down the table, these populations were all represented. In fact, many of the most inspiring stories came from these unique intersections. For example, a table captain had a captivating conversation - all written on paper - with a deaf attendee.

But evidence of such diverse representation is perhaps best seen through awarded micro-grants, including an art program to tell immigrant stories and a newly created soccer league for individuals struggling with mental health disorders.

We also sought out a well-rounded planning team that represented individuals - all under 40 - from local organizations:

Young Professionals, Community Foundation, Downtown Development Association, Grand Forks City, Air Force Base, JLG Architects, Economic Development Corporation, Red River High School, Alerus Financial, Altru Health System, Praxis Strategy Group

REPLICATION

The resounding effects of the Longest Table prove that a simple conversation can change perceptions and inspire action. The Longest Table was held in Grand Forks two years in a row - downtown in 2018 and in the town's connective university-downtown corridor in 2019.

By strategically placing the table in an opportunity area, such as a city center or urban neighborhood, this event can be used as a tool to draw attention to possibilities, inform decision-makers, and activate everyday citizens.

This flexible concept has been replicated by surrounding communities in North Dakota and Minnesota, including a local high school and at a national conference. Interest has also been heard around the country, leading to the creation of a toolkit to guide others in the steps necessary for successful implementation of their own Longest Table.

COMPLEXITY/SIMPLICITY

How do you serve a hot meal to up to 1,000 people? How do you even find enough tables and chairs for that many people? How do you create a survey to measure perceptions? How do you block off multiple city blocks? How do you get people who don't traditionally engage in civic conversation to the table? How do you involve city, county, and state leadership in a grassroots, people-first initiative?

Those were all questions our core committee had to answer and work through. We gathered people from a broad range of backgrounds, representing the populations we wanted to target, and then we got to work gathering even more people to be part of the process. All in all, the Longest Table had nearly 175 volunteers.

A wide volunteer base, a dedicated and connected core team, and a supportive local business and government community were the lifeblood of this successful initiative.