

THE WINSTON-SALEM ECHO COUNCIL

Background

The ECHO Council is being convened by the Winston-Salem Foundation as a means of extending the Foundation's efforts to build social capital throughout Winston-Salem and Forsyth County. Over the past four years, the Foundation has promoted the concept of social capital through a number of strategies:

- a multi-faceted public education campaign to raise awareness about the importance of social capital,
- participation in the National Social Capital Benchmark Survey to better understand the community's strengths and weaknesses with regard to social capital,
- ECHO Fund grants to support local nonprofits that understand the concept of social capital, and
- ECHO Awards to celebrate and publicize individuals who have taken the initiative to build social capital.

As the Foundation has engaged in these activities, the staff and board have learned a tremendous amount about Winston-Salem's strengths and weaknesses with regard to social capital. On the one hand, the community has high levels of involvement in faith-based activities, as well as a long history of charitable giving. On the other hand, there are a number of "soft spots" with regard to social capital:

- mistrust among residents, especially among residents who come from different social circles;
- an over-concentration of leadership among "traditional leaders;"
- a lack of public gathering spaces that encourage informal socializing among all segments of the community; and
- relatively low levels of volunteering, especially volunteering that involves doing things *with* people (as opposed to *for* people).

In exploring how to achieve progress on these issues, the staff and board of the Foundation came to the following conclusions:

1. People in Winston-Salem are good at doing things *for* people, but not so good at doing things *with* people.
2. Doing things *with* people is what builds trust.
3. Trust is an essential ingredient (perhaps the fundamental ingredient) in social capital.
4. **Community development** is an approach to improving the community that, by definition, involves people *working with* each other.

In sum, community development emerged as the logical framework for the Foundation to adopt in addressing Winston-Salem's primary social capital issues.

The Foundation has defined community development as:

Local people working together to develop and sustain a community economically, socially, and physically to improve the quality of life for all.

The philosophy underlying community development calls for people to develop their capacity as leaders and problem-solvers, and in the process, to become involved in specific activities that will improve the quality of life of the community. Their work will be supported and sustained by social networks – informal networks at first, but then more formal support structures that become institutionalized in the community. As people and networks are developed, the community can expect to gain: new leaders, new partnerships, more trust, and more collective action focused on the critical issues facing the community.

Community development is a philosophy. To be realized, it must be translated into a specific agenda for Winston-Salem. As a first step to developing a community development agenda, the Foundation convened Community Listening Sessions during the summer of 2003. The themes emerging from these sessions begin to paint a picture of what Winston Salem should look like:

- Community development and economic development go hand in hand.
- Decision making becomes more inclusive.
- Leadership is intentionally developed throughout the entire community.
- Volunteerism is broadened in terms of opportunities, training and who is involved.
- More public gathering places are created, especially spaces that encourage dialogue and interactions among diverse segments of the community.

Following up on the Community Listening Sessions, the Foundation is convening the ECHO Council to develop specific strategies that will advance this community development agenda.

Expectations for the ECHO Council

The ECHO Council will model the inclusive approach to leadership that was found to be lacking in Winston-Salem by the Social Capital Benchmark Survey. The Foundation will convene 25-30 community leaders who bring a diversity of perspectives, interests, backgrounds and expertise to the challenge of building social capital. By coming together in a focused, creative problem-solving mode, the Council will identify opportunities for building social capital on a community-wide basis and will design promising strategies that take advantage of those opportunities. In essence, the ECHO Council extends the existing work of the Foundation by honing in on fundamental issues that provide leverage for strengthening the community's social fabric and for improving the community's problem-solving infrastructure.

The ECHO Council's strategies for building social capital will emerge through an intensive process of planning and discovery. The lessons that the Foundation has learned through the Social Capital Benchmark Survey, the ECHO Fund, the Listening Sessions, and other related activities will provide a starting point for the ECHO Council's planning process. At the same time, the Foundation is counting on the ECHO Council to develop new expertise in the area of social capital and to make use of that expertise in developing strategies that will achieve positive results for the community. In addition, the Foundation looks to the ECHO Council as the body that will operationalize and bring to life the concept of *community development* which the Foundation has adopted as a means of building social capital. Additional Listening Sessions with community audiences will provide the ECHO Council with ongoing input to help the ECHO Council formulate and focus its community development strategy.

In addition to developing a strategy to promote community development in Winston-Salem, the ECHO Council will exemplify a community with high social capital. The body will be intentionally diverse in its membership and sensitive to this diversity in making decisions. Leadership will be shared among all ECHO Council members, regardless of their respective "stature" within the larger community. The values of listening and mutual respect will be reinforced through facilitated conversations. Members will have a variety of opportunities (both formal and informal) to connect with one another in meaningful ways, providing the foundation for trusting relationships. Diversity in perspectives and worldviews will be encouraged. Problem solving will be co-creative and synergistic, rather than competitive. And throughout the process, the ECHO Council will be presented with insights and perspectives from community residents who are not directly involved in the planning process.

While the ECHO Council's process of planning and problem solving will attend strongly to a set of *values*, the Council's ultimate success will be judged on the basis of its *results*. Thus, the emphasis on inclusiveness, reflection and relationship-building will be balanced against the imperative for new actions that make a real difference on the social-capital issues that matter most to the community.

The ECHO Council Process

The ECHO Council's primary task will be to develop a strategic plan that promotes community development in Winston-Salem, taking into account the community input that has been gleaned through the Listening Sessions. While the process will involve a number of conventional strategic planning steps (e.g., clarifying purpose, assessing the environment, identify strategic points of leverage), the approach will be unique in that it deliberately seeks out a diverse range of perspectives in order to derive an effective strategy that resonates with the entire community.

In terms of the specific process, it is expected that the ECHO Council will meet approximately once per month over the first six months to engage in the following steps:

1. Orientation to the ECHO Council, including background on the Winston-Salem Foundation's work to date on social capital and its decision to convene the ECHO Council
2. Develop a set of shared expectations for the ECHO Council (mission, vision, values, orientation, niche, scope of work, relationship with the Winston-Salem Foundation)
3. Review of existing data (not only from the Foundation, but also other sources) that paints a portrait of social capital in Winston-Salem (*Environmental Scan*)
4. What does the ECHO Council believe that Winston-Salem should look like with regard to social capital? (*this might be answered in terms of quantitative data, what people are doing differently, the feel of the place, etc.*)
5. Identify strategic issues (points of leverage) where the ECHO Council wants to focus its attention and energy, at least initially
6. Define topics for strategy development

It is expected that these monthly meetings will run approximately 2-3 hours. In addition, the Foundation believes strongly that the ECHO Council should meet on one occasion for a more extended session that allows time for informal interactions and relationship-building. At present, this session is conceived as a two-day (one-night) retreat conducted early in the process.

At the end of six months, it is hoped that the ECHO Council will have identified a limited set of strategic issues for further development. Once those decisions have been made, it is expected that different task groups will focus on the high-priority issue areas. Each task group will have a diverse membership, drawn not only from ECHO Council members, but also other representatives from the community who have interest and expertise in the respective topic. It will be important that whatever strategies are developed by the Task Groups build on whatever work that organizations throughout the community have conducted on the topic.

Although most of the ECHO Council's work during this phase will occur within the context of task groups, the ECHO Council will convene as a full body at least quarterly in order to ensure that the different strategies are coordinated and that the ECHO Council retains its cohesiveness and overarching vision.

Job Description

Responsibilities of ECHO Council Members

For the ECHO Council process to produce meaningful and effective strategies, the individual members will need to commit to participating in the planning sessions – not only by attending, but also by fully engaging in the process. More specifically, ECHO Council members are expected to:

- Focus on the greater good of the entire community
- Bring their best ideas to the process
- Speak openly and honestly
- Listen respectfully to every other member's ideas, regardless of how foreign they might seem
- Learn from the ideas that emerge from community residents through the ongoing Listening Sessions
- Look for overlapping and converging interests, as well as "bigger" ideas that encompass multiple perspectives
- Connect the ECHO Council process to other individuals and groups not directly involved
- Look for opportunities for action within their own organizations and spheres of influence
- Have fun

ECHO Council members will initially agree to serve for a one-year term (through the end of 2004). Future commitments will depend on the governance structure that the ECHO Council adopts during the first year.

Qualifications and Qualities

- Commitment to increasing social capital in Winston-Salem
- In-depth understanding of Winston-Salem's social/political/economic environment
- Connected to and respected by a "group of constituents"
- Creative
- Strategic
- Big picture thinker
- Action oriented
- Strong listening skills
- Able to see past one's own interests to the common good
- Respectful of diverse perspectives
- High-energy
- Interested in learning