



SRDI Lessons Learned from a Rural Private, Public, Grassroots Partnership

A Brief Qualitative Evaluation of Phase One of the Rural Community Investment Partnership

Rural Community Investment Partnership Background

The Rural Community Investment Partnership (RCIP) is a public, private, and grassroots partnership in the city of Darien in McIntosh County, Georgia. Darien is a rural, coastal community rich in history and culture. However, the county has struggled to find economic viability since the decline of shrimping and a lack of economic development. The partnership's purpose is to capitalize on the opportunities created by a new housing development to stimulate communitywide improvement. RCIP's primary objectives are to:

- Facilitate housing rehabilitation, reconstruction, and infrastructure improvements in the Old River Road Neighborhood
- Establish non-traditional workforce development programs that train local residents, provide financial assistance, and lead directly into jobs
- Stimulate small business, micro-enterprise, and cooperative opportunities (e.g. landscaping, house cleaning) for local residents
- Promote systems and policy change in order to create a more just and sustainable community

Partnership Members

- *McIntosh SEED (John Littles)*: A grassroots support organization which is committed to creating and sustaining a healthy and diverse community through community development, community organizing, advocacy, and direct service
- *Georgia Tidewater Development (Steve Watson, Laurel Brady)*: A for-profit, housing developer who purchased land in a Darien neighborhood to build Indigo Harbor, a 220 lot subdivision with homes in the price range of \$200,000 to \$300,000
- *Old River Road Neighborhood Association (Chair - Karen Clark)*: This neighborhood, which surrounds Indigo Harbor, is historically African American and predominately low-income, with a median home value of \$57,900.
- *City of Darien (Frank Feilds)*: Darien's first Economic Development Director

Phase One

RCIP is transitioning from Phase One of its development. Main activities from this stage include:

- Relationship and trust Building across race, class, and sector
- Developing a common vision
- Getting city buy-in of the project to the point where they have become an important partner
- Leveraging developer fees for CDBG (Community Development Block Grant) and CHIP (Community Housing and Infrastructure Program) funding

As these activities have unfolded, RCIP's vision has evolved to include the potential of bringing in approximately \$3 million in federal and state funding for improvements to the Old River Road Neighborhood and surrounding areas.

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Brief qualitative evaluation of Phase One

As RCIP moves to its next phase, SRDI staff conducted a brief, relatively informal qualitative evaluation to assess the processes (what the partners did) and outcomes (the early results of the partnership) in RCIP so far. This evaluation is qualitative: The data are comments and quotations (as opposed to quantitative evaluation where the data are numbers). The purpose of the evaluation is to better understand the development of the RCIP and to provide a tool for future rural community development work. SRDI conducted a focus group with John, Laurel, Steve, and Karen, while Frank was interviewed separately. Five questions were asked. SRDI facilitated the focus group and interview, and took careful notes on people's comments. These comments are the evaluation data. SRDI staff then reviewed the comments looking for common threads or themes (qualitative analysis). A summary and interpretation of these data is below.

How did this partnership come about?

From the beginning, there was an alignment of core values and a common vision for improving the local community. There was also a mutual self-interest as each member of the partnership had something to gain by working together. However, the key was the *opportunity* for action created by the Indigo Harbor development. For the first time, a developer sought community input, wanted the neighborhood to benefit from their project, and was willing to leverage assets to spark greater change. In addition, a shift in city leadership led to a stronger commitment to revive Darien's neglected neighborhoods.

RCIP's creation can be illustrated by the following equation:

Values + Vision + Opportunity = Collective Action Across Sectors

- *“It was a coalescing of the right people and elements at the right time and place.”*
- *“There have been many developments in the community but no opportunities. This provided an opportunity to have a vision – a 3 way opportunity.”*
- *“Indigo Harbor is the opportunity to put our vision into action.”*
- *“Combination of the right thing to do for the community, for the city, and for our business.”*

What had to be in place for this unique partnership (between the grassroots and mainstream) to form?

Partnership members committed the time and energy to build authentic relationships – amongst themselves and with community members. These relationships developed by building trust, communicating, being visible in the community, putting aside differences, and supporting each other. Also, each partner had to tap into their individual courage and belief in the project, despite a lack of support, criticism, and threats.

- *“A huge divide existed between the community and the local government. Steve had the money and leverage to bring them to the table and help bridge that gap.”*

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- *“Despite the criticism that I’ve sold out (racially, economically, environmentally), I saw this as part of my work, part of my job. This was an opportunity to leverage future work in the community and for the community to benefit.”*
- *“This is a huge opportunity to change the history of Darien, to break down the barriers, and to stand shoulder to shoulder for the betterment of our community.”*
- *“It was the alignment of opportunity and need.”*

What results do you see so far?

After identifying a list of results, the group came to the realization that a wealth of things had happened without Indigo Harbor even beginning construction. The housing development was a catalyst for RCIP’s work; it has also led to broader citywide efforts to improve housing and infrastructure. Specific results include:

- A new way of working across race, class, sector, and historical barriers
 - The City of Darien submitting CDBG and CHIP applications for the first time
 - Utilizing \$500,000 in developer fees as matching funds for the CDBG application
 - Providing a venue for local residents to drive the CDBG process through the community visioning sessions
 - Drafting an Urban Redevelopment Plan for the City of Darien
 - Local government participation
 - Strengthening SEED’s presence in the community
 - Indigo Harbor pledging 1% of house sales back to the community
- *“There’s a new sense of accountability to the community. The city, developer, and SEED need to report on their progress in the community meetings.”*
 - *“A whole new atmosphere exists in Darien. We’re finally defying the old boy network that existed here.”*
 - *“People from different walks of life are actually sitting down and talking with each other.”*

What lessons have you learned that you’d like to share with other communities regarding creating a grassroots and mainstream partnership?

Developing a partnership between the grassroots and mainstream is a process that requires the alignment of values and vision, relationship and trust building, on-going communication, and broader community engagement. The main advice for other communities is to uncover the *opportunity* for cross sector action and get a project started. Once trust is established and the potential of this kind of partnership becomes understandable and tangible to the participants, greater community change is possible. As evident in that RCIP’s vision started with one neighborhood, but has now shifted to focus on comprehensive community change for the entire City of Darien.

- *“Even in communities which have never worked together, the desire is always there – Liberate it!”*

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- *“Remember that it’s amazing what can happen when folks begin working together. Without collaboration, you’re just stuck in the mud.”*
- *“Start by developing members of the community, then developing houses and sidewalks.”*
- *“You’ve got to have a strategy in order to create change; experts with the right values are a necessary part of the process.”*

How would you define SRDI’s role?

SRDI’s involvement clarified the process and provided a framework to merge the existing ideas and vision. We’ve helped define the goals, objectives, plans, and strategies of the project while working as an on-the-ground partner to strengthen grassroots participation and accelerate the work of RCIP.

- *“SRDI kept the process on track.”*
- *“SRDI partnered with us to accelerate the process.”*
- *“SRDI put all the pieces of the puzzle together.”*
- *“As mediators and facilitators SRDI has helped clarify the process and make this project understandable and tangible”*

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