Atlanta Regional Commission's Civic Dinner Parties

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<u>What it is:</u> In 2015, ARC's Millennial Advisory Panel focused on three major topics of development in the Atlanta metro area: World-class infrastructure, competitive economy, and healthy, livable communities. MAP members expanded conversations about these topics to neighbors and peers through a series of informal dinner parties, known as the Civic Dinner Party Project. Over a period of four months, panelists hosted 35 civic dinner parties, reaching an additional 300 people, and engaging them in conversations about regional planning issues and gathering their input.
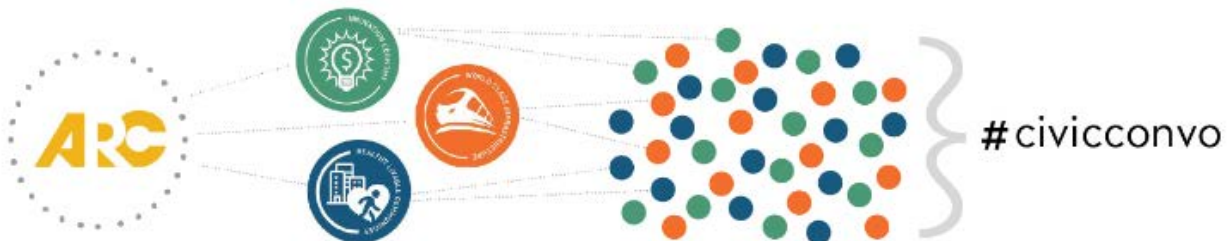
<u>Interest to NJTPA:</u> Millennial focus group participants stated that they were more likely to attend public meetings if they were invited by someone they knew, but some reported that even a personal invitation would not convince them to attend a meeting they expected to be boring. Civic dinner parties involve Millennials in important conversations in a fun, social atmosphere and provide an opportunity to invite more friends.

<u>Major Takeaways:</u>

1. **Success in attracting Millennials rests in using non-traditional engagement strategies:** Millennials were drawn to the dinner party concept because it was seen as novel, highly interactive, and it involved a meal. Participants viewed the dinner parties as less of a chore/responsibility and more of a social event. Additionally, discussion over a meal

tended to elicit a deeper and more nuanced discussion than meetings held in traditional settings, which can be a bit uncomfortable for some.

2. **Importance of social media cannot be overstated:** Social media (Facebook, Twitter, invite.com) was a key driver to keeping interested parties in the loop and maintaining continued involvement. The content of the discussions generated at dinner parties was passed back to ARC though social media outlets. Further, the participants were encouraged to share posts (pictures, tweets, videos, etc.) about their dinner party experiences in order to spread the word to other millennials participation and encourage new and increased involvement. The Facebook page for the Civic Dinner Parties became a hip forum where people could keep up with each other's events and experiences.

3. **Attracted educated, motivated, and community-minded people:** The idea for the dinner parties evolved out of a call for applications for a youth-oriented advisory panel. Many individuals who hosted or participated in the dinner parties went through that competitive selection process and were invested in the process/issues from the beginning. In fact, this program was successful in part because it allowed participants to transition into leadership roles that helped to frame the discussion about core issues affecting their peer and their communities.

4. **Potential to result in tangible impact:** The dinner party discussions resulted in the creation of eight action teams, which were given real support from ARC. The action teams initiated their own projects, presented their work to prominent community leaders, and one action team even created its own 501(c)3. In effect, these dinner parties were not simply a one-time event intended to collect data. Rather, they became a jumping off point for more involvement and continued action.

5. **Requires adaptability:** ARC did not lay out a specific, detailed agenda in advance for the dinner party program. Instead, it offered a simple and clear set of core themes and allowed participants to evolve those themes on their own through discussion. It is a program that would work best by leaving the participants some flexibility to shape their own issues while providing supporting guidance as needed.

6. **Needs an initial investment (but low maintenance costs):** To begin the program, ARC had a major kickoff event that included renting a large space, inviting guest speakers, and training facilitators to engage small groups in discussion. There were two other events similar in scale held over the next year. Additionally, three happy hour events were held to provide informal training and ease the pressure of hosting responsibilities. However, the dinners themselves required no funding and most of the data collection came through free social media

7. **Lack of funding for dinners might be an obstacle:** While ARC's program experienced great success, expecting millennials in North Jersey to pay their own way at dinner parties

might be tough sell. It would also bias the feedback towards those demographic groups that can afford to participate in such an activity. Providing a small stipend to reduce participant costs might provide a more diverse representation of the millennial population.

8. **Very Millennial-focused:** There was some concern at ARC that, due to the program's success, millennials were receiving disproportionate attention relative to other age groups. It would be wise to integrate experienced non-Millennials into the process to allow for cross-program cooperation and avoid dismissal/resentment of successes. Additionally, seeking out millennials from all backgrounds and regions should be a priority to ensure that participants are a representative group. Perhaps searching for student leaders at community colleges or religious institutions would be helpful.

Discussion:

Where did the idea to use civic dinner parties come from?

We decided a couple of years ago to bring new kinds of input to the table, so we created a program called "New Voices." Our first task was reaching out to Millennials because our plans extend to 2040, so we needed input from young people. We had two young people on our board, so they championed our efforts to get the Millennial Advisory Panel going.

We had a consultant team that helped us hone in on how millennials want to be engaged. The focus groups led us to understand that they prefer non-traditional recruitment. We came up with the idea of an advisory committee and put out a call for applications through normal channels such as the chamber of commerce and other professional associations and an article about it was written in the Atlanta Business Chronicle, which was a big boost. We ended up with 350 strong applications, which was far more than we had anticipated. 135 of the 350 were admitted to the MAP, but we kept the others in the loop through our Facebook page and by inviting them to other activities. Through various processes, we had the MAP formulate their own major questions that corresponded to the three broad themes that are represented in our comprehensive plan: world-class infrastructure, innovation economy, and healthy, livable communities.

We had three really important meetings throughout 2015, the first of which was our big "kickoff" event in March. We began the "kickoff" by having three "rock stars" (one for each of the three themes) do short speeches to frame the issues related to their respective area and demonstrate how this was a big opportunity for the panel members to make a real impact. Next we brought the MAP members to a bigger room, where there were 12 trained facilitators (4 for each theme) that helped guide groups of about 10 people in size through coming up with

questions they thought were central to each theme. These questions were put up on big boards, and then the groups would rotate so they could sample each theme and continue to provide input. We ended up with 450 questions, which were then further narrowed down to help create "toolkits" that could be used by hosts at the dinner parties.

After the "kickoff" event, we spent time evaluating the questions and refining the themes. We partnered with invite.com (social event-oriented website connected to Facebook and Twitter that uses a hashtag to create virtual connections and allow for user-generated content) and created "toolkits" for the hosts to keep the conversation focused and engage the attendees. The host might start with a broad question such as, "How do you define world-class infrastructure?" After gauging responses, the host might have 5-7 potential follow-up questions to keep the conversation flowing. The host would take notes to submit back to ARC through invite.com. Since the information gathered at the parties was submitted through invite.com, there was minimal ARC staff required to collect it.

Were the participants at these dinner parties people who had been to the "kickoff," or were they the more general public?

It was probably about 50-50. We charged the MAP members to engage their peers and we e-mailed all our followers to encourage them to attend a dinner. Some people were hesitant to host a dinner, so many simply attended. In the "toolkit," we mentioned that the dinner could be at a restaurant, at a house, it could be a picnic, or potluck, etc. The idea was to keep it flexible but center it around food because food brings people together. Once people understood what it was, there was tremendous excitement and many people were eager to host.

To address this initial hesitancy, we created a working card deck with instructions about hosting and directing discussion. We also organized three happy hours (one for each theme) that included games that were almost mini-versions of the dinners to ease the pressure and clue people in about how to host. At the end of these three happy hours, we asked people to pledge to host, and a total of 20 people agreed.

Did you provide a stipend for hosts? How were costs addressed?

There was no stipend. We made it clear that it was a pay-your-own-way event, which encouraged hosts to hold dinners at reasonably priced restaurants and made sure to let everyone know there would be separate checks. Some did potlucks to minimize costs, others cooked for the whole group and asked for everyone to contribute a small dollar amount. The big expenditures for ARC were the "kickoff" event, two other events, and the three happy hour events: All other costs were regular staff costs or taken on by the participants.

How do the discussions and conclusions at the parties get back to ARC?

The main source of our content is the host, who is responsible for taking notes and submitting them to us. Some were verbatim, some were just highlights. However, we encouraged all participants to share their input and experiences on our Facebook page, which hosts were generally successful in getting participants to join. This was vital, as it became a "cool kids" club where people would share not only their attendance, input, and pictures from the dinners, but also other events/articles/etc. that were related to the topics of discussion, which allowed for constant chatter that kept people continuously engaged. This blossomed as people realized that coming to the dinners and providing input would result in their ideas being shared on a bigger forum and heard by leadership of the ARC.

Are there any specific examples of output from discussions that ended up playing a major role in shaping policy or directly impacting the implementation of a project?

Absolutely. After the dinner parties took place over two months, we held our second event, during which we shared a report that summarized the main findings. At the top of the list for all of these discussions was the need for a more robust and versatile transit system. We devised eight action areas and devised eight respective action teams that they signed up for. One of these teams was charged with championing a regional transit system. The transit action team formed a 501(c)3 called Advance Atlanta. Also there is direct connection between the work of the eight action teams and ARC's policy framework. One huge impact came from allowing each action team to make a presentation at a mixer for a diverse group of prominent community leaders. This sent a huge message that they are passionate and serious about their futures, which forced influential people to reassess their understandings of Millennials. Not only did they impact our regional plans, they are impacting broader policies ranging from food equity to education to transit. This has given them a voice, and they have launched themselves out independently. Another goal of ours was to get other parts of government to start bringing younger voices to the table. Among other initiatives, last week the metro chamber launched a "40 under 40" leadership group, and it seems that that these types of things have come directly out of the impact of these action teams that originated from the dinner parties. Further, the success of the general process creates a platform that can be translated to a variety of other public engagement uses.

Where has Advance Atlanta gotten funding from?

 Some of the members happen to be in prominent positions, so they have been able to press the legislature for funding and convince groups like ARC to donate, as well. They also did a fundraiser recently through online crowd sourcing and were able to generate another $2,000.

Have you applied the civic dinner party concept to other areas, uses, or issues?

This all started from a much simpler concept about getting people together over meals to discuss what they liked about Atlanta. There was a large enough feedback that we realized we needed to partner with bigger organizations to allow for sustained initiatives and ensure that the results of these conversations go to places and people of influence. In general, we wanted to reinvent the word "civic" to be more about fun and participation rather than being associated with responsibility or something boring like a chore.

Apart from posts on Facebook, Twitter, and invite.com, were there other ways that you collected participants' evaluations and feedback on the dinner parties?

Everything we got back was so positive that we really didn't feel the need to do a more extensive evaluation. We were getting instant results via Twitter, and people were just really excited about it.

We did send a short questionnaire to all the hosts, and it tended to be all positive. The "toolkit" was a big help in simplifying the process.

If you were starting from scratch, is there anything you might have done differently?

One thing that created some friction was that people at the ARC office thought the Millennials were getting too much attention and had "Millennial fatigue." Some people thought that there were lots of programs and hard work being done elsewhere that wasn't getting the attention or support they deserved. However, to mitigate this, we did have older, more experienced employees act as advisors to the action teams.

Another difficulty was that this type of thing had never been done before, so we weren't sure how it would turn out. We were fortunate enough to enlist Jenn, who in turn had a good group of contacts that helped make this a success. The fact that we had the trust and confidence of our board has a big element, as well. We underestimated our budget, but were lucky to have the freedom to inflate it as the concept took off.

Are there other regions or MPOs that have utilized this concept?

I've heard that there might be something similar going on in Chicago, but I'm not sure. But there are groups affiliated with the National Network of Communities Foundation that are interested in looking at this model. This format of a dinner really changed the conversation. It brought really different people together, and having the conversation at a meal really changes the way people speak and interact. The technology allows for this to happen, but it's the personal connections

and the relationships that come out of them that make it worthwhile. It's a universal concept, so this model could really be applied anywhere.