

Understanding Social Capital & How it Works in Our Community

A Project of the
Bay Area Community Council



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I. Executive Summary

Established in 1991, the Bay Area Community Council consists of 21 persons representing the private, public and non-profit sectors of the community. Its goal is to present to citizens of Brown County insight into future issues that may affect the community.

This paper centers on the issue of social capital. Social capital is the stock of social trust, norms and networks that people can draw upon to solve common problems. Social capital fundamentally is the result of the formal and informal networks created within our community that allow us to know and trust one another.

The level of social capital in a community has direct impact on business, children, neighborhoods and health. Social capital leads directly to individual and community prosperity; it creates a community in which children have a better chance to succeed; it develops neighborhoods which are clean, safe and welcoming. Communities with high social capital are good for personal health.

Essentially, there are two forms of social capital, bonding and bridging. Bonding occurs when people from similar backgrounds interact. Common forums are churches, clubs and organizations, neighborhood associations and related activities. Bridging social capital is the network of connections with those outside our normal relationships. Examples may include ecumenical organizations, multicultural centers and schools.

The debate over English as Brown County government's "official" language is a recent example in Brown County of how social capital works in our community. Factions formed quickly and groups developed strong and intractable positions. There was an immediate ratcheting up of bonding when groups drew together in support or opposition to the proposition before them. In the absence of a trusting bridge, the issue was settled in an atmosphere of winners and losers.

Communities, for better or worse, have never been static, but today, the pace of community change is straining the ability of its members to work together for the common good. The rapid growth of urban sprawl, new patterns of employment and entertainment, the pressure of time and the introduction of new cultures are challenging our connectedness

The biggest challenge to social capital is individual complacency. The challenge to us is to create opportunities for people to become engaged with one another.

The best social capital occurs naturally.

(Check the websites of community organizations like the Greater Green Bay Community Foundation, United Way of Brown County, Green Bay Area Public Schools and Green Bay Area Chamber of Commerce for a complete copy of this paper if you are viewing this Executive Summary as a single-page document.)

II. Definitions & Research Methodology

Definitions

- The Bay Area Community Council (BACC) is a nonprofit corporation established in 1991. It is a council comprised of citizens providing Brown County with insight into future issues affecting the community. It does this by: a) examining anticipated concerns affecting the community's growth and health, b) analyzing these issues using rigorous discussion and discovery, c) effectively communicating these concerns or findings to the community, and d) engaging the community in how to address these issues.

Members of the BACC board of directors during this project were: Jon Anderson, James Coller, Judy Crain, Paul Demuth, Rose Dobkoski-Smiths, Patricia Finder-Stone, Bud Harris, Paul Jadin, George Krempin, Jim Liethen, Toni Loch, Noel Halvorsen, Dotty Juengst, Harry Maier, Tim McKenna, Nan Nelson, Nancy Nusbaum, Cal O'Harrow, Helen Schaal, Ken Strmiska, Duanne Swift, Debra Thundercloud, and Steve Taylor.

- **Social Capital.** Most of us are personally familiar with the concepts of financial capital. From an individual perspective, financial capital allows us to buy homes, send kids to college, invest in the stock market, and to buy all sorts of luxury items. The more personal financial capital that one has the more benefits and opportunities are created.

While social capital is more complex to define, it is similar to financial capital. It accumulates, it can be produced and the more that exists in a community—the more benefits its residents receive. Social capital is the connection among individuals in the community. For the sake of our discussions we will use the following definition:

Social capital is the stock of social trust, norms and networks that people can draw upon to solve common problems...the denser these networks, the more likely that members of a community will cooperate for mutual benefit...[These] networks of civic engagement:

- foster sturdy norms of generalized reciprocity by creating expectations that favors given now will be returned;
- facilitate coordination and communication, and thus create channels through which information about the trustworthiness of other individuals and groups can flow, and be tested and verified;
- embody past success at collaboration, which can serve as a cultural template for future collaboration on other kinds of problems;
- increase the potential risks to those who act opportunistically that they will not share in the benefits of current and future transactions. (Sirianni & Friedland, 1995)

Social capital is fundamentally the result of the formal and informal networks created within our community that allow us to know and trust one another. Social capital is created collectively but produced individually between members of a community. It “greases the wheels” of our community so that we can focus on things that make us productive at work and relax at home. It is

the connections that allow us to reach beyond our immediate families for help, to create business opportunities for mutual benefit, and to create meaningful friendships.

Research Methodology

The research methodology for this project consisted of two phases: a) limited review of the social capital literature and b) BACC members conducting primary research with a select group of organizations throughout the country identified as being engaged in social capital building projects. These researched organizations were community foundations located in the following states or communities: New Hampshire, St. Paul, MN., Silicon Valley, CA., Rochester, NY., Arizona, York, PA., and Denver, CO.

III. Introduction

Our community is changing. The change is a result of new cultures, urban growth, new patterns of work, and macro-societal forces. While change has always shaped our community, recent forces may be straining our community's ability to work collectively for the greater good.

Recognizing this social trend, Harvard Professor of Public Policy, Robert D. Putnam published a national bestseller in 2000 entitled, "**Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community.**" In this work he points out that the current decline of league bowling over the past several years is a microcosm of what is happening throughout our society. We are choosing to disengage from group activities (including friends and neighbors) to go it alone. This may not seem important at first but bowling leagues and similar activities provide us with opportunities to get to know one another and to learn about what is happening in our community. Likewise our community is not immune from "bowling alone" for in the spring of 2001, the Green Bay Press Gazette chronicled the demise of league bowling in northeastern Wisconsin.

Beginning in January, 2002 the Bay Area Community Council (BACC) undertook an effort to understand social capital. We wanted to see if it could help us to better handle some of the changes that we see going on in our community. In particular we wanted to know the following: a) what is social capital?, b) how does social capital impact our community?, and c) how does what we do increase or decrease the amount of social capital in our community?

To that end, we spent the past year researching, reading, discovering and debating the concept of social capital. The results of our work are presented in this paper. This paper is not intended to be a full review of the concepts of social capital but rather to provide a general understanding of its basic tenets and how it works in our community.

In the end we want and need people to act on the information in this document. If the ideas in this paper do not cause people to act - we have failed. In Section VIII we have provided a listing of activities for individuals, companies and organizations in which to engage to increase social capital.

IV. Social Capital Matters

Social capital is not just a feel good concept with very little practical value. The level of social capital in a community has direct impact on business, children, neighborhoods, and health. The following provides a synopsis of some of the benefits of living in a community high in social capital.

Business

Social capital directly leads to individual and community economic prosperity. Individuals that have many connections are more likely to have greater economic success. “Social networks provide people with advice, job leads, strategic information, and letters of recommendation.” (Putnam, 2000 p. 319) It is the old saying that “who you know is more important than what you know.” Similarly on an aggregate level, when companies and business can trust each other they extend credit or expertise to each other to mutually benefit each others bottom line.

Children

Social capital creates a community in which kids have a better chance of succeeding. In states with high social capital, babies are, “... born healthy, teenagers tend not to get pregnant, drop out of school, get involved in violent crime, or die prematurely due to suicide or homicide” (Putnam, 2000 p. 296). In the context of children, social capital means having engaged parents and neighborhoods, parents involved in school activities, parents involved with their children’s friends’ parents, and neighbors knowing who the kids are on their street. A Kids Count study found that the impact of social capital on a child’s life was second only to poverty (as cited in Putnam, 2000 p. 297).

Neighborhoods

Neighborhoods high in social capital are clean, safe and welcoming. In these neighborhoods there is a lot of formal and informal contact between neighbors. “The sum of such casual, public contact at a local level—most of it fortuitous, most of it associated with errands, all of it metered by the person concerned and not thrust upon him by anyone—is a feeling for the public identity of people, a web of public respect and trust, and a resource in time of personal and neighborhood need.” (Putnam, 2000 p. 208). Knowing neighbors turns into concern for their well-being.

Health

Communities high in social capital are also good for personal health. “...Public health researchers have established beyond reasonable doubt that social connectedness is one of the most powerful determinants of our well-being. The more integrated we are with our community, the less likely we are to experience colds, heart attacks, strokes, cancer, depression, and premature death of all sort.” (Putnam, 2000 p. 326) If we live in a community in which we feel others care about us or one in which our neighbors call to ask how we are doing we feel a sense of connectedness.

V. Bonding vs. Bridging Social Capital

Social capital is the collective product of the connections that individuals make among themselves. But, not all social capital is equal or good. Putnam identifies two essential forms of social capital—bonding and bridging.

Bonding social capital occurs when people from similar backgrounds (economic, religious, ethnic, social) interact. Common forums for bonding social capital are churches, fraternal organizations, neighborhood associations, and country clubs. Bonding social capital is exclusive and tends to reinforce member's pre-existing ideas and norms of behavior.

Bonding social capital by its nature is easier for most people. It is making strong friendships with people like one's self. But bonding social capital can also produce negative results such as racism or sexism. By building and reinforcing the connections within a group, the distance between the group and others can grow to distrust and enmity. It is important to recognize this limitation of bonding social capital. In the end, the strength of the connections formed and the opportunities it affords are limited to those who belong.

Bridging social capital, on the other hand, is the network of connections established with those of us outside our normal relationships. Examples of bridging social capital include ecumenical organizations, multicultural centers, and public schools. While bonding social capital works exceptionally well for those living in homogeneous communities, bridging social capital is crucial for getting ahead in a diverse community (Xavier de Souza Briggs as cited in Putnam, 2000, p. 23).

Bridging social capital is the accumulation of outward looking or non-group connections among individuals. This inclusive form of social capital helps information flow and enables the individual or group to leverage external assets (Putnam, 2000, p. 23). Bridging social capital helps individuals develop a sense of belonging to a larger group, one that transcends specific socio-economic or ethno-cultural identities.

Bridging social capital has extra relevance given our community's rapidly changing demographics. According to Putnam, "bridging networks are better for linkage to external assets and for information diffusion" (2000, p. 22). Bridging social capital expands one's wealth of resources such as ideas, people, and opportunities. To create bridging social capital takes more individual effort and needs to be supported by a community that creates natural opportunities for bridging social capital to develop.

Putnam notes that many groups bond and bridge simultaneously and that both forms offer positive social effects. Warning that social capital, like other forms of capital, can be, "directed to malevolent antisocial purposes...therefore it is important to ask how the positive consequences of social capital—mutual support, cooperation, trust, institutional effectiveness—can be maximized and the negative manifestations—sectarianism, ethnocentrism, corruption—minimized." (Putnam, 2000, p. 22).

VI. Status of Social Capital in our Community

While the Bay Area Community Council has not done a formal study to assess the level of social capital in our community, we see many community indicators that support an atmosphere for bonding and bridging social capital. This anecdotal evidence is reinforced by the results of Putnam's measures of social capital in which Wisconsin typically ranks in the top third of states. Putnam's work would suggest that Wisconsin is moderate to high in terms of social capital.

Examples of activities, organizations, and infrastructure that supports social capital building in our community include the following:

- Mayor's Neighborhood Resource Board
- Parent Teacher Organizations
- Neighborhood Resource Centers
- Multicultural Center of Greater Green Bay & the Rainbow Arts Festival
- Extensive park system & development of Fox River trail
- Public concerts in St. James Park, Jackson Park and Heritage Hill
- The variety of service clubs such as Kiwanis, Optimist, Altrusa, Zonta, & Rotary
- Social service activities of many of the churches
- Charity golf outings
- Volunteer Service Learning requirement for Green Bay Area Public Schools' students
- Strong voter participation in local as well as state & national elections
- Ecumenical Partnership for Housing
- Kids Voting & Teen Court
- Habitat for Humanity
- Celebrate America Fest
- Employers Workforce Network

The bay area, because of its size, location, and professional sports franchise has an opportunity to create bridging and bonding social capital unlike most other cities in the United States. Win or lose, the Packers give us all something in common. This shared experience cuts across race, sex, cultural and economic boundaries. This presents a tremendous opportunity for bridging social capital as our community becomes more diverse.

As pointed out by Putnam and Galper, social capital is harder to maintain and build in communities with greater diversity. This will be a challenge for our own community as we see more Latino, Hispanic, Eastern European, and Southeast Asian peoples making Green Bay their home. Retaining and developing new forums and activities for building social capital will be of vital importance for the future of our community.

Overall, the stock of social capital in our community is high. But we cannot rest. We have warning signs telling us that all is not well with our community. Some of these signs include: a) gang activity, b) high levels of teenage pregnancy, c) increasing homelessness, d) racial conflict in schools, e) contentious political discourse, f) increasing truancy rates, and g) violent crime and homicides.

While these indicators are troublesome, the issues that they represent are not insurmountable. They will be solved in part by a community high in bridging social capital. But no matter how much bridging social capital a community has—social capital is not stagnant—it is increasing or decreasing. As a community we can and must make a concerted effort both as individuals and organizations to continue creating opportunities for bridging social capital.

VII. Barriers to Social Capital

As noted in a previous section of this paper, communities high in social capital are better places in which to live; residents are healthier, safer and have greater economic opportunities. So what would hold us back from achieving such a desired state?

It turns out that several factors are working in concert to hinder our ability to connect with one another. By identifying these barriers, we hope that appropriate community members or institutions move to change things that are not helping to further social capital.

The following section focuses on some of the major challenges we face to create greater stocks of social capital:

- **Community Design & Urban Sprawl.** Communities are no longer designed for us to interact with a common set of people. We commute to work in one area of town, drive to another for shopping and yet another to attend a house of worship. In the process, we often go alone and rarely see the same group of people. Further aggravating this disconnect are suburban developments that place homes farther apart and are without sidewalks, front porches, and neighborhood stores.
- **Entertainment.** Our homes are increasingly becoming our entertainment centers. With the advances in program delivery through televisions and computers, there is less need to gather with others to share entertainment experiences such as concerts, lectures, and movies. This “cocooning” leads to less interaction and knowledge of fellow citizens.
- **Time.** Today, in most families, both spouses work outside of the home. While this might be an economic necessity, it takes away from the time that used to be available for social capital building. Activities promoting social capital include dinner parties for friends and neighbors, neighborhood block parties, and neighborhood crime prevention programs. It should also be pointed out that additional opportunities for children to participate in sporting and other events have added additional time pressures to families.
- **Work.** Over the past decade companies in general have become less supportive of employee community involvement and external leadership activities. Once seen as a prerequisite for future organizational leadership, today companies do not place as much emphasis on their top managers becoming engaged in community affairs. This loss of leadership and access to corporate resources has had a tremendous negative impact on social capital and community building.
- **Nonprofits.** Volunteer opportunities through nonprofit organizations have typically been a good source for building social capital. But many nonprofits have not adjusted their opportunities to the realities of the time pressures and increased talents of potential volunteers.

- Government. Governmental agencies at all levels, but especially at the local level, must look at the social capital costs of each law or tax imposed. Local government should encourage active citizen participation through open meetings, civil discussions and the use of neighborhood associations. Local government cannot make social capital happen but it can have a significant impact on creating the right environment for it to occur.
- Media. The local media (newspapers, radio, & television) also impact the climate for social capital building. Does the media create a balanced view of the community or does it unwittingly foster a climate of distrust among citizens? Does it focus on what people have done to each other or for each other?

While each of these barriers is significant, they are not excuses for inaction. The biggest challenge to social capital is individual complacency. But collectively as a community, through our governmental, political, corporate, religious and nonprofit entities, we need to create many opportunities for people to become engaged with one another. The final result will be greater stores of bridging and bonding social capital.

VIII. Action Steps

People need to act and to recognize that each of us—as well as our institutions—are responsible and capable of building social capital. Below are 100 ideas for individuals to build social capital followed by ideas for community institutions. Those interested in action are encouraged to read the “Better Together—A Civic Nation at Risk” report from the Saguaro Seminar available on the Internet.

Social capital is built through hundreds of little and big actions taken every day. Try some of these or try your own. Build connections to people. Build trust with others. Get involved.

100 THINGS YOU CAN DO TO BUILD SOCIAL CAPITAL

1. Organize a social gathering to welcome a new neighbor
2. Attend town meetings
3. Register to vote and vote
4. Support local merchants
5. Volunteer your special skills to an organization
6. Donate blood
7. Start a community garden
8. Mentor someone of a different ethnic or religious group
9. Surprise a new neighbor by making a favorite dinner—and include the recipe
10. Tape record your parents' earliest recollections and share them with your children
11. Plan a vacation with friends or family
12. Don't gossip
13. Help fix someone's flat tire
14. Organize or participate in a sports league
15. Join a gardening club
16. Attend home parties when invited
17. Become an organ donor
18. Attend your children's athletic contests, plays and recitals
19. Get to know your children's teachers
20. Join the local Elks, Kiwanis, or Knights of Columbus
21. Get involved with Brownies or Cub/Boy/Girl Scouts
22. Start a monthly tea Group
23. Speak at or host a monthly brown bag lunch series at your local library
24. Sing in a choir
25. Get to know the clerks and salespeople at your local stores
26. Attend PTA meetings
27. Audition for community Theater or volunteer to usher
28. Give your park a weatherproof chess/checkers board
29. Play cards with friends or neighbors
30. Give to your local food bank
31. Participate in Walk-a-thons
32. Employers: encourage volunteer/community groups to hold meetings on your site
33. Volunteer in your child's classroom or chaperone a Field trip
34. Join or start a babysitting cooperative
35. Attend school plays
36. Answer surveys when asked
37. *Businesses*: invite local government officials to speak at your workplace
38. Attend Memorial Day parades and express appreciation for others
39. Form a local outdoor activity group
40. Participate in political campaigns
41. Attend a local budget committee meeting
42. Form a computer group for local senior citizens
43. Help coach Little League or other youth sports – even if you don't have a kid playing
44. Help run the snack bar at the Little League field
45. Form a "tools cooperative" with neighbors and share ladders, snow blowers, etc.

46. Start a lunch gathering or a discussion group with co-workers
47. Offer to rake a neighbor's yard or shovel his/her walk
48. Join a carpool
49. *Employers:* give employees time (e.g., 3 days per year to work on civic projects)
50. Plan a "Walking Tour" of a local historic area
51. Eat breakfast at a local gathering spot on Saturdays
52. Have family dinners and read to your children
53. Run for public office
54. Stop and make sure the person on the side of the highway is OK
55. Host a block party or a holiday open house
56. Start a fix-it group—friends willing to help each other clean, paint, garden, etc.
57. Offer to serve on a town committee
58. Join the volunteer fire department
59. Go to church or temple or go outside with your children—talk to them about spirituality
60. If you grow tomatoes, plant extra for an lonely elder who lives nearby – better yet, ask him/her to teach you and others how to can the extras
61. Ask a single diner to share your table for lunch
62. Stand at a major intersection holding a sign for your favorite candidate
63. Persuade a local restaurant to have a designated “meet people” table
64. Host a potluck supper before your Town Meeting
65. Take dance lessons with a friend
66. Say "thanks" to public servants – police, firefighters, and town clerk...
67. Fight to keep essential local services in the downtown area—your post office, police station, school, etc.
68. Join a nonprofit board of directors
69. Gather a group to clean up a local park or cemetery
70. When somebody says "government stinks," suggest they help fix it
71. Turn off the TV and talk with friends or family
72. Hold a neighborhood barbecue
73. Bake cookies for new neighbors or work colleagues
74. Plant tree seedlings along your street with neighbors and rotate care for them
75. Volunteer at the library
76. Form or join a bowling team
77. Return a lost wallet or appointment book
78. Use public transportation and start talking with those you regularly see
79. Ask neighbors for help and reciprocate
80. Go to a local folk or crafts festival
81. Call an old friend
82. Register for a class – then go
83. Accept or extend an invitation
84. Talk to your kids or parents about their day
85. Say hello to strangers
86. Log off and go to the park
87. Ask a new person to join a group for a dinner or an evening
88. Participate in pot luck meals
89. Volunteer to drive someone
90. Say hello when you spot an acquaintance in a store
91. Host a movie night
92. Exercise together or take walks with friends or family
93. Assist with or create your town or neighborhood's newsletter
94. Organize a neighborhood litter pick-up – with lawn games afterwards
95. Collect oral histories from older town residents
96. Join a book club discussion or get the group to discuss local issues
97. Volunteer to deliver Meals-on-Wheels in your neighborhood
98. Start a children's story hour at your local library
99. Be real. Be humble. Acknowledge others' self-worth.
100. Tell friends and family about social capital and why it matters

5+ THINGS A CORPORATION CAN DO TO BUILD SOCIAL CAPITAL

1. Run a United Way campaign & other community fundraising campaigns
2. Sponsor an employee sports team or league
3. Adopt a school or class for mentoring
4. Adopt a highway for litter clean-up
5. Adopt a family for holiday or school supplies
6. Encourage all employees to read the same book
7. Create community speakers forum and invite elected officials as well as non-profit executives to address company employees about a timely community issue
8. Give employees time off to vote and encourage them to vote

5+ THINGS A NONPROFIT CAN DO TO BUILD SOCIAL CAPITAL

1. Create meaningful volunteer opportunities to fit the knowledge and skill levels of volunteers
2. Schedule volunteer activities to accommodate working people
3. Invite service groups and other community groups to have their meetings at your facility
4. Bring your program or demonstration of it to a new setting
5. Partner with other nonprofit with which you typically don't have a relationship (e.g. school, religious organization, government)
6. Create community educational forum to engage and explore community issues & solutions

5+ THINGS RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS CAN DO TO BUILD SOCIAL CAPITAL

1. Ecumenical Service
2. Exchange religious leaders
3. Create a forum for community leaders to share topical information with congregation
4. Partner on a community project (e.g. Habitat for Humanity, food drive)
5. Adopt a school or community agency addressing an issue of importance to the congregation
6. Sponsor a sports team, scouting troupe or other group activity
7. Arrange dinner parties or picnics with families from another religion

5+ THINGS A GOVERNMENT CAN DO TO BUILD SOCIAL CAPITAL

1. Create long-range growth plans that facilitate work, family, and social activities with minimal transportation needs
2. Develop neighborhoods with sidewalks, green space, shopping, and schools
3. Establish and maintain active citizen advisory boards
4. Elected officials and government employees adopt the philosophy of servant-leadership
5. Measure and anticipate the social capital impact of any new law, ordinance or tax
6. Sustain and enhance public spaces for citizens in which to gather

IX. Conclusion

The constructs comprising social capital are not new. But what is new is the identification of these elements as the underpinnings of a healthy community. Social capital comes out of our agricultural heritage of helping each other to harvest crops or to collectively build a barn for our neighbor.

As identified in this paper, some changes leading to better environments for social capital can be made immediately while the harmful effects of other developments may be harder to reverse – such as suburbs without sidewalks and corner stores. But many things leading to greater stocks of social capital can occur immediately. These activities focus on individual efforts such as inviting your neighbor over for coffee, getting involved in a civic group, mentoring a new resident, or attending a concert in the park.

The best social capital occurs naturally. We call on all citizens to look for opportunities to become engaged and to become active proponents of building and supporting social capital development. In addition, we call for government, business, and non-profits to make sure that their policies, operations, and structures enhance the climate for social capital building.

Finally, we invite you to add to our understanding of how social capital is working in our community. If you have examples of local social capital or things that could be changed to make social capital building easier in our community, please write or e-mail the BACC care of Nan Nelson at P.O. Box 1660, Green Bay, WI 54305 or nelson@titletown.org.

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