

NAVASOTA NEIGHBORHOOD DAY

Background

The applied planning course within the Masters of Urban Planning program at Texas A&M University is designed to give students hands on experience in working with communities. The class typically works in conjunction with the Texas Target Communities (TTC), a program to help small, low-resourced communities across Texas, with technical assistance on land use planning and design. With the help of faculty and students in the applied planning course and others in the Department of Landscape Architecture and Urban Planning (LAUP) has worked with more than 40 communities over more than twenty-five years. In the fall of 2013 however, the applied planning course took a different approach to public engagement. With support from the College of Architecture's (COA) Action 2015: Education First initiative, the Applied Planning program decided to try a new approach called Tactical Urbanism, or small-scale, short-term and grass-root efforts to improve the look, function or "livability" of communities.

Tactical Urbanism (TU) is an informal; citizen led style of planning that has become popular as a means of responding to landuse challenges and opportunities by temporarily altering the current land use to reflect a more desirable alternative, without applying for legal permits or permission from city planning authorities. To be clear, often TU installations have the support of city authorities, but because the alterations are temporary, organizers may not be required to follow regular procedures. This allows target audiences and/or end-users to "try-out" a series of small-scale interventions to see which - from adding landscaping, to temporary bike lanes, or pop-up restaurants - have the most potential to foster more economic, social or other benefits for the community. The book *Tactical Urbanism 2* details a range of tactics tried throughout the world, however students and faculty in LAUP were inspired to try Tactical Urbanism after hearing an April 2013 by presentation by Rik Adamski, a leading advocate and practitioner of Tactical urbanism principles.



Site Selection

The City of Navasota was chosen for this event to address issues identified in the City's comprehensive plan, which had been completed by the previous applied planning course under the direction of Elise Bright. The new Navasota Comprehensive Plan (NCP) identified some areas for revitalization to the infrastructure along with vacant and underutilized properties. Also, mentioned in the plan was the importance of engaging the local community to gain more public support for these changes. Therefore, the purpose of the Tactical Urbanism effort was to take the ideas from the plan and engage the citizens of Navasota in an effort to apply temporary but promising solutions for reimagining underutilized spaces.



The first step in planning the Navasota Neighborhood Day was to consult the Navasota Community Development Director, Sarah Korpita. During the consultation Sarah identified three areas of potential, including the need for programming at the historic Carver Community Center (CCC). The Center, once the site of Navasota's African-American high school, is a large and underutilized space less than a mile from city hall. Sarah also expressed interests in nurturing a growing interest in community garden activity throughout the city as well as a desire to address the lack of sidewalks and connectivity between neighborhoods where residents lacked safe pedestrian access to downtown. After meeting with Sarah, students in the class followed up with a broader network of local leaders, city officials from, and representatives of community based organizations such as the Texas Small Farmers and Ranchers Organization, a regional organization based in Navasota, with offices located at the CCC. This information gathering effort reflected the importance of community engagements in accordance with NCP and provided students with a better understanding of community conditions, concerns and capacity related to increasing programming at the CCC as well as community support for a range of potential Tactical Urbanism strategies to highlight opportunities to address connectivity challenges. It was clear that citizens supported activities aimed at raising awareness of the Carver Community Center as a hub for the community.

After meeting with a network of stakeholders in Navasota, students began studying the guidebook on TU to get a better understanding of the range of options available to address opportunities in Navasota, in keeping with the NCP. Unfortunately, most TU cases have been implemented in large urban areas and it became evident that rural places like Navasota have few examples to model. Nevertheless, some options exist, such as farm-to-markets, which bring together farmers and gardeners in a marketplace to demonstrate the potential economic gain for growers within the community. Other options include a "park day" or "pre-vitalization" where a variety of new activities are imagined and modeled on an underutilized parcel of land. After a second round of consultation with community stakeholders, the class proposed the first annual Navasota Neighborhood Day.

Project Overview

Students met again with local stakeholders at the Carver Community Center to present ideas for the Navasota Neighborhood Day. The vision for Navasota Neighborhood Day included a combination tactics and after providing a broad overview, students asked meeting participants to split into smaller breakout groups to discuss the specifics. The smaller groups allowed community members to provide meaningful feedback and determine how best to collaborate in making the vision a reality. In short, the goal of this day was to bring attention to potential uses for the Car, provide a connection to the downtown and to show potential opportunities for the future, including the creation of site plans. In addition, the main event would take place at the CCC and include a variety of kid's activities, a farmers market, local food vendors, tours of the Carver School, community garden installations, and a small display of the future of the Carver Center. The connection between the downtown and the CCC would be highlighted through a temporary bike lane.

In order to manage planning and execution for the Navasota Neighborhood Day, students broke into teams based on their interest, talent and expertise. The groups were organized as follows: design, marketing, communications, and documentation teams.

- A. Design - In charge of developing a draft site planning document to show how the Carver Community Center could be used in the future.
- B. Marketing – Led efforts to publicize news about Navasota Neighborhood Day, including distributing flyers to businesses, schools, and churches and posting ads in the local newspaper and radio stations.
- C. Communications - Initiated contact between stakeholders in the city to ensure their support and involvement.
- D. Documentation - In charge of documenting the entire process through pictures and videos over the course of the semester and in community meetings on the day of the event.

Of each team and task identified above, students learned that *Communication* was the most critical. Students were in charge of contacting the local partners to meet all needs in a timely fashion. With regard to logistics most challenging was determining the number of cones necessary and appropriate signage for a temporary bike lane, approximately one-mile long, connecting the event location to downtown Navasota. Students also needed to create an event site plan, depicting where stations, booths, and events would be located. Finally, most activities were planned for outside, and students had to come up with an alternative in case of inclement weather.



Implementation and Outcomes

Attendance at the Navasota Neighborhood Day was impacted by cold and rainy weather; however, those who showed up were the some of the most influential in the community, which made the event significant. Each person to show up expressed an interest in more activities to expand and strengthen the community fabric and for folks who had never been in the same room before to work on common goals in more collaborative ways. Therefore, the Navasota Neighborhood Day planted a seed for the future of the Carver Community Center and the community. In addition, the inclement weather provided an opportunity to highlight the CCC's as a viable space for community events.



In addition to meeting the collective objectives of citizens in Navasota, the Navasota Neighborhood day addressed a number of program objectives of the updated Texas Target Communities program. In particular, the Navasota Neighborhood Day affected Social, Civic, Human and Economic capacity in Navasota, by strengthening relationships (i.e., Social capacity); expanding stakeholder engagement through deliberate efforts to encourage participatory and collaborative action (i.e., Civic capacity); and by involving citizens in of the design and implementation of promising strategies, thereby increasing the human capacity to make informed choices and execute strategies independently. By inviting local businesses vendors to set up booths the event also had a minor but symbolic Economic impact. The people attending openly commented that they didn't think it was possible to use the building this way and to bring such a diverse crowd together. The feel and message relayed to us as people left was a resounding feeling of being inspired.

