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IDENTIFYING NEEDS IN YOUR COMMUNITY

As part of Taking the Next Step, a group of Grade 12 students from a Francophone school decided to create an exciting project for their families and community. Since it was only the beginning of the school year, the teacher suggested they include some activities from the project as part of their cooperative education class as the class's objectives were aligned with their initiative.

An old park not too far from the school had become an abandoned wasteland after the playground equipment had been taken out. It was a busy yet uninviting spot (full of waste, graffiti on trash cans, etc.). New parks and playground equipment had been popping up in nearby neighbourhoods. This wasteland, owned by the city, was at a central location and next to the school.

The student group from the same class wanted to maximize the park's potential and transform it to meet the needs of the school (students, teachers and others), but also for residents. After a brainstorming session, the students decided to organize a few events to understand the needs of the community surrounding this abandoned wasteland. They then met stakeholders from community groups in the city (community centres, youth centres, organization for people living with disabilities, organization for retired people, women's groups, agencies serving immigrants, etc.), and went to city hall in addition to sharing a memo at school that was intended for students and employees alike. Meanwhile, the community centre offered its rooms to facilitate meetings, when required.



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IDENTIFYING NEEDS IN YOUR COMMUNITY

The posted message informed citizens that an evening of discussion was going to be held in the multipurpose room of the community centre on Thursday of the next week at 7 p.m. The students also told the mayor how they wanted to redesign the park. The mayor told them she was open to their community initiative, but they would have to get their final plan approved before they could start.

The meeting brought together around 15 participants. The agenda was presented: presentation of the student group and everyone's interests, discussions around two questions presented to the participants, varia.

The student group prepared some questions to guide the evening of discussions. The questions were: What are the problems with the abandoned vacant lot? What needs could this space address?

During the meeting, two students from the group wrote down the ideas that came out of the discussions. From these notes, they were able to make a list of identified needs and make sure they weren't repeated.



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IDENTIFYING NEEDS IN YOUR COMMUNITY

The needs identified during the meeting were:

- 1) Support citizens' health,
- 2) Reduce exclusion and loneliness,
- 3) Encourage intergenerational relationship building and social diversity
- 4) Keep the French language, Acadian and Francophone culture as part of everyday life.

The following is a list of every idea mentioned during the discussion that could address citizens' needs.

- Community garden
- Skate park
- Meeting space (socializing)
- Parking
- Sports court (baseball, basketball, tennis, volleyball, etc.)
- Open air training equipment
- Bocce ball court
- Pool
- Library
- Youth Centre
- Cultural space
- Request to add visual arts elements (painting, knitting, drawing, architecture, etc.)



1

SETTING THE GOALS OF THE PROJECT

A second meeting was scheduled to decide (in a democratic fashion) the direction the joint project would take. To gather as many people as possible, a young woman from the group suggested creating an open Facebook group to better share the information. She was then in charge of sharing the group with the other participants.

A visually impaired woman offered to inform associated organizations of the place and time of the next meeting, reaching out to her own network. The community organizer in charge of the multipurpose room offered to create and install a poster to inform users of the meeting as well.

Participants agreed to set up the next meeting on the same night, three weeks later, to gather as many people as possible. Other participants suggested sharing the Facebook group and talking about the meeting in different settings (work, family, sports teams, etc.). Furthermore, everyone agreed that carrying out actions to increase the project's visibility didn't need to be formally agreed upon in an assembly.

In the meantime, four students decided to encourage the high school's students and employees to participate. They created posters with questions written on them, the same questions they asked during the meeting: "What are the problems with the abandoned vacant lot? What needs could this space address?" They also mentioned the place, date and time of the next meeting on the posters. The four students had their posters up during lunch hour and after class they talked to people walking through the wasteland.



2

SETTING THE GOALS OF THE PROJECT

Many students, teachers, contributors and employees of the high school stopped to talk with the students who were located throughout the wasteland. After each discussion, the students would encourage the people they talked to to attend the next meeting to collectively decide what shape the project would take. They mentioned it was a good opportunity to speak about their needs and participate in a joint project that would also benefit the whole community.

A few new elements were addressed during these onsite discussions. The four students wrote them down to add them to the original list of things to discuss during the meeting. The added elements were:

- 1) keep the Francophonie alive and empowered in the community;
- 2) make the space more inviting; and
- 3) maintain a sustainable and eco-friendly development plan.

Ideas for solutions that could address the needs were:

- A “little free library” where citizens leave a book and take another one
- Plant trees and flowers
- Plant fruits and vegetables accessible and free for all (Incredible Edibles)
- Install compost bins
- Install creative “historical panels”



3

SETTING THE GOALS OF THE PROJECT

During the second meeting, about 50 people gathered to discuss and decide what direction the project was going to take.

The identified moderators in the student group, assisted by the community organizer of the community centre, welcomed the participants and presented the agenda. They started the meeting by mentioning what had been done since the last meeting and stated verbally, with the help of a PowerPoint presentation, the list of needs and solutions to address the needs of the community.

Participants were asked a question: What are the needs or solutions that were not mentioned on the list? Many participants said that some needs could be easily integrated, like having a sustainable and eco-friendly development plan and making the space more inviting. Furthermore, everyone agreed to group “Keep French language, Acadian and Francophone culture as part of your everyday life” and “Keep the Francophonie alive and empowered in the community” into a single need. It became “Keep the Francophonie alive and empowered, as well as the Acadian and Francophone culture as part of everyday life.”

To make the discussion and decision-making process easier, 5 big cards numbered from 1 to 5 entitled “priority need” were scattered across the room. The moderators asked participants to write the 5 needs they considered the most important in order of priority (card #1 = priority 1, card #5 = priority 5). To help them, the PowerPoint presentation slide showed all the needs mentioned during the exercise. If the need they considered most important was already listed, participants were asked to mark an X beside it. Participants were asked to only write one need on each priority card.



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SETTING THE GOALS OF THE PROJECT

A card was added for the needs suggested that could easily be integrated into another need. Participants wrote on that card any needs they felt could be easily integrated to another need, even if they had already written that need on a priority card.

At the end of the exercise, the moderators counted and wrote the answers on cards while the other students invited participants to get a snack.

In order of priority, the needs identified were:

- 1) Make the space more inviting
- 2) Encourage intergenerational relationship building and social diversity
- 3) Keep the Francophonie alive and empowered, as well as the Acadian and Francophone culture as part of everyday life
- 4) Maintain a sustainable and eco-friendly development plan
- 5) Reduce exclusion and loneliness
- 6) Support citizens' health

The needs written on the "easily integrable" card were:

- 1) Make the space more inviting
- 2) Support citizens' health
- 3) Maintain a sustainable and eco-friendly development plan
- 4) Reduce exclusion and loneliness

A discussion that alternated between men and women followed, led by the students and the community organizer.

This allowed participants to give their opinion about the order of priority for each need, as well as offering solutions that could address the priority needs.



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SETTING THE GOALS OF THE PROJECT

After the discussion, a large majority of participants identified the two priority needs: “Encourage intergenerational relationship building and social diversity” and “Keep the Francophonie alive and empowered, as well as the Acadian and Francophone culture as part of everyday life”.

To choose the final project, participants wanted to pay attention to citizens’ demands:

- 1) Maintain a sustainable and eco-friendly development plan
- 2) Add visual arts
- 3) Provide universal accessibility

Also, participants believed that considering these aspects on top of the identified needs would make the space more inviting so it could become a social hotspot.

At the end of the meeting, participants agreed to meet two weeks later to continue their efforts and to allow everyone to think about what kind of project they wanted that could address the identified needs. The next meeting was going to be more formal; the project that could address the identified needs of the population was going to be put to a democratic vote.



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SETTING THE GOALS OF THE PROJECT

To lend a helping hand to the project's implementation, many people wanted to get proactive and make things move, so they volunteered to accomplish certain tasks. The student group, supported by their teacher and the community organizer of the community centre, suggested that participants form an official committee as part of the community centre. Teaming up with an official organization would facilitate monetary transactions, the longevity of the project and citizen's decision-making. Participants accepted the proposal unanimously. Those interested in helping make the project a reality therefore had the opportunity to form a committee. Before the next meeting, the committee had to officially identify the project's goals (general/specific) that were to be accepted at the beginning of the meeting.

Other participants also shared the information in different community settings, like seniors' associations, youth centres, high schools, city hall, and the region's New Brunswick Association for Community Living.



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SETTING THE GOALS OF THE PROJECT

General goals:

Transforming the abandoned wasteland into a place that encourages social diversity, intergenerational relationships and that keeps the Francophonie alive and empowered, as well as the Acadian and Francophone culture as part of everyday life. The youth centre showed interest in becoming an official partner of the project, providing facilitators and encouraging youth participation of its regular members.

Specific goals:

1. Develop the project with the help of citizens.
2. Involve every age group in the decision-making and design stages of the project.
3. Involve marginalized groups in the decision-making and design stages of the project.
4. Include historical, cultural and Francophone elements in the project's design and implementation.
5. Bring the space back to life with a sustainable and eco-friendly development plan.
6. Include visual arts in the project's design and implementation.
7. Have an accessible layout for everybody.
8. Keep the citizens and the community involved in the project.