



**2013 Transforming Local Government Conference
Case Study Submission**

Case Title: "From PlayDoh to LEGOs, Building a Community through Collaboration"

Case Study Category: Community Building or Partnerships

Jurisdiction Name: North Port, Florida

Population: 58,000

City/County Manager Name: City Manager Jonathan Lewis

Would you like the application to be considered for an Innovation Award? Yes

Would you like the application to be considered for our Rapid Fire Session? Yes

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SYNOPSIS:

With a median age of 40 and more than 10,000 school children, the City of North Port is young. At 53 years old, this 104-square-mile municipality is barely old enough for an AARP card.

That youthfulness is a mindset found in North Port. The City and its residents are full of robust energy, vibrant vitality, and innocence typically associated with a young adult graduating from high school and looking at a bright future endless with possibility.

Imagine LEGOs strewn all over a living room floor. Imagine a pile of colorful PlayDoh molded into a nearby cookie cutter. North Port's residents aren't afraid to create, to mold, to image the possibilities. They work to shape the community that they want to be part of and call home. This City's history is pot marked with examples of residents who have risen to the occasion to make a difference and shape this community into what it is today.

Collaborations – with community organizations, other government agencies, individuals, and businesses - are at the very foundation of how the City of North Port operates and provides its services. After all, we all know that it's the colorful building blocks of a community that create a city – a truly *great* one.

Let's put this in perspective. As the largest city in Sarasota County, North Port is home to three Kiwanis Clubs, two Rotary Clubs, a vibrant Chamber of Commerce, two AmVet Posts, a strong veteran community, more churches that can be counted (with new ones developing each week), and much more. This translates to large building blocks – from Legos to Duplos – that make up the City of North Port. Here are a few examples of innovative collaborations in recent years that proved successful:

North Port Family Service Center: Through collaborations, the City is able to help local residents in need. In 1980, the City of North Port first established a Social Services Division to assist families and individuals in need of short term financial assistance. For a city to offer this kind of service is not normal. Typically, services are operated at the county level, if at all.

Funding for community assistance through the Social Services Division is received through various grants, foundations, individual donations, volunteers, churches, civic groups, and schools. These charitable sources, along with collaborative partners and other outreach programs, enable the City of North Port to provide a lifeline to North Port residents in need.

For years, Social Services operated out of portable classrooms at a local school due to collaboration with the Sarasota County School District. That changed in 2008, when the City celebrated a ribbon cutting of a new Family Service Center. It was those same community collaborations that support the program that made this building possible. Funding came from a Sarasota County/Community Development Block Grant, a grant from the Gulf Coast Community Foundation of Venice, a grant from the William and Marie Selby Foundation, site work from the Suncoast Foundation for Handicapped Children, and window donations from PGT.

Now in full operation, the Family Service Center houses the City's Social Services Division and 12 other nonprofit agencies. From October 1, 2008 to September 30, 2011, the Family Service Center has provided more than \$1.2 million in financial assistance to families in North Port.

The Social Services Division and the Family Service Center is only possible through the commitment of City leaders, past and present, and the many, many community collaborators who saw the need, shared the City's vision, and committed to help the City of North Port make a difference.

Bus Shelters and Commuting: Collaborations are instrumental building blocks when it comes to the City's infrastructure, as well. In the summer of 2012, Sarasota County Area Transit, or SCAT, began constructing a new \$500,000 park-and-ride at the City Center campus next to City Hall. The new enhancement will provide 60 new parking spaces reserved for residents to use while taking a bus from North Port to Sarasota. Parking spaces are also available for those



who want to carpool. In addition, in 2012, the City finished constructing five new bus stop shelters and enhanced landscaping at a cost of \$160,000. By the end of this summer, SCAT will have constructed another 19 bus stop shelters within the City limits. These shelters provide a covered seating area connected to sidewalk paths.

The City's collaborative efforts and continuous focus on promoting alternative methods of commuting have not gone unnoticed. The City received a "Best Workplaces for Commuters" award by the Florida Department of Transportation's Commuter Services program. The City's efforts also were recognized as a case study at the 2012 Florida Commuter Choice Summit.

North Port Art Center: In 2006, the City of North Port moved its operations into a new City Hall. This left a series of empty buildings and office space that were part of the old City Hall. The North Port City Commission voted to lease one of the buildings for \$12 a year to the North Port Art Guild, a rapidly growing organization that had attempted, for years, to raise enough capital to open up a community art center.

Since that time, the organization has grown to a full 230 members and changed its name to become the North Port Art Center. Art classes and workshops throughout the year draw an estimated 100 participants a week. Programs include a child summer art camp, various art classes, community enrichment seminars, an open art gallery, and much more. Recently, the Art Center opened its door to the City Manager's Office to host a "Community Conversation on Fiscal Responsibility." The event drew about 30 people, many of which had never been to the Art Center before, to discuss the City's finances.

In 2010, the North Port Art Center worked with the University of South Florida to accommodate a modular classroom. The City of North Port paid \$15,000 to move the building and have it placed on the Art Center's campus. This allowed the Art Center to build a pottery studio. This studio, which opened in 2011, has seen more than 400 people walk through its doors. Its collaborations like this that help increase the quality of life for North Port residents. These types of program can be mimicked in communities across the country.

North Port Newcomer Day: Five years ago, the City of North Port, in collaboration with the North Port Area Chamber of Commerce and the North Port Library, recognized the need to reach out to residents to tell them about their City services, projects, programs, and more. At the time, the City had more than doubled its population in less than four years, and many North Port residents weren't connected to their community. The Library's staff was getting feedback from residents who said they felt lost and overwhelmed.

To help resolve this, the three agencies opted to host a "North Port Newcomer Day" four times a year for two hours on a Saturday morning at the North Port Library. Local nonprofit and government agencies were invited to set up information tables during the event. Now in its fifth year, North Port Newcomer Day pulls in more than 50 nonprofit and government agencies, and the Chamber of Commerce invites about 12 businesses. The event averages 200 attendees each time. The cost to the City to host the event is minimal.

The success of North Port Newcomer Day has resulted in other communities mimicking its setup. The City of Venice, alongside the Venice Area Chamber of Commerce, has started "Venice Connection Day" four times a year at a local Venice Library.

Get Energy Smart Program: Collaborations are found in nearly every project and program, including the City's efforts to promote green living to its residents. In 2010, the City received an Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grant (or EECBG) of \$476,100. The City collaborated with Sarasota County, the City of Sarasota, and the City of Venice in a countywide "Get Energy Smart Retrofit Program." The program offered rebates on home energy audits and home improvements to decrease energy usage, as well as a loan program for income-qualified residents.

After more than 17 months (February 2012), the City of North Port, along with its partners, ended the program. About 113 North Port homeowners received \$170,500 in retrofit rebates that enabled energy efficiency projects worth



more than \$687,500. Sixteen income-qualified residents received retrofit loans averaging \$5,000 each. As an incentive to encourage residents to apply to the program, the City distributed 247 free Do-It-Yourself energy-savings kits, each worth more than \$80. Each kit included CFL light bulbs, rope caulk, “smart” power strips, low-flow faucet aerators, gaskets for light switches and outlets, toilet leak prevention kits and a reusable shopping bag.

The success of the Sarasota-North Port-Venice program caught the attention of the Department of Energy, which featured a presentation on the program in one of its peer-to-peer exchange webinars. Although it appears unlikely that another EECBG program will be offered any time soon, North Port’s program is a great operational model for local governments who are considering incentives to encourage residents to become more energy efficient.

Warm Mineral Springs: Collaborations with other governments provide not just a cost savings to tax payers through shared resources, but also provide an opportunity to work together to shape the future. In the case of North Port, collaboration with Sarasota County resulted in the conservation of a significant environmental wonder that could likely turn into an economic development driver.

On December 20, 2010, the City of North Port and Sarasota County jointly purchased an 81-acre site known as Warm Mineral Springs for \$5.5 million. The Warm Mineral Springs is a natural, warm mineral spring located inside the City limits. This natural resource contains 51 minerals, which makes up the highest mineral content of any natural spring in the world. The spring consists of 9 million gallons of water that fully replenishes itself every two hours. A day spa has been in operation on the property since 1946 and draws more than 80,000 annual visitors. For decades, the destination has prided itself on its healing abilities and has the unique opportunity to become a world-class spa and bring people from all over the world to the City of North Port.

Public ownership of this property also resulted in the preservation of a significant asset. The Warm Mineral Springs is listed in the National Register of Historic Places as one of the most important underwater archaeological sites in America. The ledges beneath the springs are the focus of many underwater archaeology investigations and have provided information about the lives of Florida Paleo Indians. The remains from of an 11,000-year-old man was pulled from the Springs along with remains from saber tooth tigers, giant sloths and tortoise. The purchase of Warm Mineral Springs also resulted in the preservation of the surrounding area. The 81 acres includes a considerable amount of open space. Public acquisition was designed to preserve the sites geological features and include the preservation of the water source associated with the downstream habitat of the West Indian manatee.

Already, the community has been part of the process to decide the future of this natural asset. In January 2012, the City and County hosted a series of public input sessions in which people were encouraged to share their visions. The City and County continue to work collaboratively on this project.

University of South Florida: In 2010, the City of North Port became a “university town.” This is due to collaboration with the University of South Florida. In March of that year, the North Port City Commission signed an agreement that outlined the University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee’s commitment to remain within the City limits for a minimum of five years and assist the City with identifying and planning education programs. In return, the City would construct 50 parking spaces near the campus, waive permitting fees associated with renovations and signage, and waive all other property development and impact fees. The project cost the City \$268,000 to build the 50 parking spaces.

The benefits to having a university within its borders have led to a significant increase in the quality of life for North Port residents. There is also benefit to businesses along the U.S. 41 corridor who are near the USF campus.

Collaborating with local organizations, other government entities, and businesses is so engrained in North Port and the way that the City operates, that examples can be found in nearly every activity, program, and project the City undertakes. Residents in North Port aren’t just names in a phone book. They are vital members of a city that is being shaped by the people who live and work in it.



PRESENTATION OUTLINE:

Project Title: “From PlayDoh to LEGOs, Building a Community through Collaboration”

Description: Known for its youthful population, youthful mindset, and youthful energy, the City of North Port’s presentation will feature a colorful video that highlights the voices of the City’s youth. Video captured will focus on stories of community partnerships using actual North Port students. Each child will talk about examples that have made this City innovative, such as the Family Service Center, the University of South Florida, the North Port Art Center, Warm Mineral Springs, and many more.

In between each video segment, the key takeaway points will be presented by key leaders who are physically in the room with the audience. Those include:

- Listen to your community. Residents are willing to share ideas and tell you what they want.
- Be brave and willing to take risks. Innovation can be scary, but often times rewarding.
- Recognize and give tribute to those who help. This ensures lasting relationships.
- Track. Measured results help you to evaluate and adjust.
- Learn from each other. Collaboration. Teamwork.
- Tell your story. Others can learn by example.

The presentation will be designed to be fast paced and entertaining. Once finished, the audience will be split up into teams for teamwork assignments. Groups will be led through an interactive project using LEGOs that help demonstrate that working together is critical to building a foundation of community. Each attendee will leave with a small handful of LEGOs and an associated handout with the six key points.

Takeaways: Attendees will learn:

- Six components to helping foster collaborations.
- Ways to track and measure results that are easy to do and don’t take much staff time.
- Innovative ways to listen to their community.
- Techniques for telling their story.