

Written by Debbie Leaman

Perched on the bank of the Jordan River in the Euclid neighborhood close to the bustle of I-80, a stately Victorian mansion sits vacant. But on a cold and cloudy Sunday afternoon last February you could barely get in the door; hordes of people snaked up stairwells, checked out the attic, peeked at the carriage house, and spilled onto the lawn; all were there to take a look, many to give suggestions to the City of Salt Lake on how to use the newly acquired space. Two thousand people showed up for one of two open houses. Slated for community use, the historic Fisher mansion is the inaugural project for Salt Lake Solutions, a program initiated by the Mayor Becker administration, which works from the premise that the citizens are stakeholders in their own communities, and that their voices need to be heard.

Collaborative government: “the way Salt Lake City does business”

The Salt Lake Solutions approach is to engage the community in helping create opportunities and solve community problems. The process involves collaboration, consensus building and transparency in project initiatives and city government. It’s the new paradigm for “the way Salt Lake City does business:” Stakeholders (citizens), businesses, non-profits and government employees share and contribute ideas through open dialogue.

Michele Straube is the organization’s director. She describes the program’s two initiatives: “Identify projects which serve as a model of this type of decision making; and enhance collaborative capacity within city government.”

Mayor Ralph Becker has seen Straube at work for many years, and admired her skills as the facilitator for Governor Huntsman’s Blue Ribbon Advisory Council on Climate Change, the reason why he tapped her for the job.

Straube built a practice as a mediator and large group facilitator after taking a mediation course in 1992. At the time she was an attorney working as a policy consultant in Washington D.C. “Once I learned the principles of conflict resolution, it changed how I conduct myself and what I wanted to devote the rest of my professional career to,” she says.

From workplace mediations and community advisory group facilitations to a collaboration among environmental groups, ranchers and the U.S. Forest Service, Straube has helped diverse groups reach consensus. “I include all the voices and perspectives. Together we identify the goals and objectives and, as a group, decide on the end-goal. We throw a lot of options on the table. Through brainstorming, the solution grows organically from the conversation.”

Project-based approach

Straube’s manner is unassuming. That characteristic may help in getting the job done. “Her whole demeanor puts everyone at ease,” says Karen Hale, communications director, Office of the Mayor, agrees. “People are willing to talk and that elicits responses.”

“She gains the confidence of people,” Becker adds. “She’s not carrying her own agenda and is trusted as objective. She listens well.”

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And, ultimately she responds to everyone who offered a suggestion, explaining why it was accepted or rejected. “She values any response from any constituent,” says Hale.

The downside? According to Straube, in any collaborative process, some frustration ensues. “No one person or interest group can dictate the decision.” The concept of collaboration takes more time, “but the decisions made using this process have greater buy-in and are therefore more easily implemented.”

Her approach has proven to be very effective. In less than a year, by integrating public and private support, three vital community-based projects have been launched: Fisher Mansion; Pioneer Park; and the newest, Community-based Air Quality Improvement.

Fisher Mansion

Fisher Mansion was acquired by the City in 2007 as the final easement to complete the Jordan River trail, with the original intention of subdividing the trail easement and selling off the rest of the property. The Victorian mansion was built in 1893 and designed by Richard Kletting (architect of the State Capitol). As the new mayor, Becker recommended that the buildings be renovated in a way that maintains their integrity and used as community space. The question was, “as what?”

With City Councilman Van Turner as co-convenor, a Partners Team was chosen, consisting of representatives from the neighborhood, historic preservation, sustainable renovation, trails, transportation, business, arts and education communities. Salt Lake Solutions received over 200 suggestions for the mansion, including a public art gallery, community center, museum, bicycle co-op, micro-brewery, artisanal restoration training project and bed and breakfast (all suggestions are found on the website).

Using the Community Objectives as their guide, the Partners Team outlined their vision for this historic property. After reviewing all comments and splitting the Team into smaller working groups, one common theme emerged: that at least some part of the property’s future use should leverage its location on the Jordan River Trail. Because of its proximity to the river and the Jordan River and City Creek bike trails (and eventually the Legacy Parkway bike trail, ultimately linking three trail systems together), Fisher Mansion is ideally situated to be a focal point for community use.

The next step was the reality check, “to calculate what it’s going to cost to bring the building back to some level of historic accuracy,” says Straube. University of Utah’s architecture students drew up a preliminary historic structures report and a formal assessment of the property’s history and condition. The Structural Engineers Association of Utah offered to work on the seismic assessment, and Zions Bank has donated an initial outlay of capital to use as a match in requesting federal grant funding. Other supporters are listed on the website.

Not everyone was included in the initial process. Private and commercial developers asked to be involved but were not invited onto the Partners Team. “It’s slated for community use, not private,” says Straube. “When the group has decided how to use the property, we will go to the

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entire community, including developers, to find individuals and entities interested in making it happen.”

Pioneer Park: “It Takes a Neighborhood”...to build a neighborhood park

Pioneer Park, home to the Downtown Alliance’s summer Farmers Market, re-opened mid-June after basic improvements were completed, including a dog park, running track, enhanced entrances, increased lighting and additional trees. Safety had improved, but perception of change lagged behind.

Enter Salt Lake Solutions. With Becker and City Councilman Luke Garrott co-convened a Partners Team from the surrounding neighborhood with representatives from the residential and business sectors as well as homeless community representatives and service providers, property owners, police and the Downtown Alliance.

Initially the Partners Team met weekly, focusing on actual safety and perceptions of safety. They got all ideas on the table, then reached agreement on an approach to ensure the park’s safety and livability. They concluded that regular activities, during the park’s open hours, will entice people back and revitalize the park.

A wide variety of public events in the park were organized, financed through community and corporate contributions. From morning yoga classes to Sunday night “BBQ and Bocce,” both sponsored by the Downtown Community Council, Pioneer Park was filled with folks new to the park. Free lunchtime concerts were sponsored by the Salt Lake City Public Services. And in August, Friday night international movies (with free popcorn) hosted by the SLC Film Center attracted hundreds of people from diverse backgrounds each week, creating a new vitality in the park. “It was mind blowing to see so many people with their families, blankets, and coolers in the park after dark,” says Topher Horman, director of operations for the SLC Film Center.

Has the perception of safety changed? “The numbers speak for themselves,” Horman says.

“The park is different than it was 10 years ago. It’s starting to be used as a neighborhood park,” adds Straube.

Salt Lake Solutions’ second project has been “enormously successful, bringing everyone together,” says Becker. “Talking through issues, brainstorming and the creative process has resulted in a much faster change in the character of the park.”

The next step? More infrastructure improvements have been designed, but remain unfunded. Straube wants to implement the Solutions process to assess “the current needs and desires of the community. Then we’ll prioritize.” Salt Lake Solutions and the City Council will host a public forum to discuss future renovations. Check out the website for more information.

Community-based

air quality improvement

Salt Lake City was recently named by Forbes.com as one of the top-10 most stressful metropolitan areas in the country, based on quality of life indicators which include air quality.

An idling reduction campaign that began in October, aimed initially at grade schools, is an example of the type of project that Salt Lake Solutions will be implementing. Run by the Office of Sustainability, this collaborative effort of the city, county and state addresses the challenge of reducing emissions and ozone levels in the Salt Lake Valley.

In the spirit of rallying the grassroots level to effect change, the initiative focuses on what we do that impacts air quality and how we can improve our habits. The ultimate goal is to reduce “red alert” days.

The legacy of Salt Lake Solutions

The Salt Lake Solutions process is as important as the outcome; transparency makes it accessible. For instance, its website includes minutes of meetings; suggestions are solicited and posted.

Mayor Becker says it’s the paradigm for how he would like to see city government run. His administration has been developing a transparency model for Salt Lake City government. “We’re going through an education process,” he says. “For some, it’s intuitive; for some, it’s not natural.” Straube will facilitate some of these meetings.

With Salt Lake Solutions as the model for process and governance, we can look forward to more collaborative community-based projects. Already the clean air initiative is being considered as a model for other communities around the country.

Salt Lake City as the example for the nation—what could be better?

Debbie Leaman writes frequently for CATALYST.

Salt Lake Solutions website: www.slcgov.com/SLSolutions