

On December 13, 2011 a meeting was held to discuss current needs and future directions for the East St. Louis Action Research Project (ESLARP). The meeting was an important opportunity to check in with the community and to begin to develop a strategy to guide the next five or so years of the ESLARP program. Below is a summary of that meeting.

The meeting was held at the Mary Brown Center on December 13, 2008. We had 51 participants at the meeting, including 31 representing East St. Louis organizations and neighborhoods, and 20 faculty, students, and staff from the University. Two questions formed the basis for discussion:

1. What challenges do you face in your work in East St. Louis?
2. What do you want from this partnership in the next 5 years?

We started with participants answering these questions on worksheets and then shifted to small group discussions. Each group was asked to present their top 5 challenges and hopes for the partnership to the group at large. These were printed on note cards that were then organized into common themes and linked issues on a large sheet of paper mounted to the wall.

It has taken us a while to analyze and reflect on the results of the meeting. We analyzed results in various ways, including looking at individual responses, small groups, and general discussion. This process has given us a lot to think about, so this report of findings might be best interpreted as a status report, with work continuing into the future.



Summary on Challenges Faced in Work in East St. Louis

While individuals listed many concerns that ranged from general concerns to very specific items, as the process continued into the larger group discussion, some key issues emerged that seemed to be shared by many. For the sake of summary, here are some common themes related to challenges:

- **Participation:** Many people voiced concerns about community apathy and the need to increase community awareness, involvement, and motivation.
- **Information:** There is a need for access to information, knowledge about resources, and sharing of information. Information needs ranged from finding out about funding to recording and collecting oral histories.

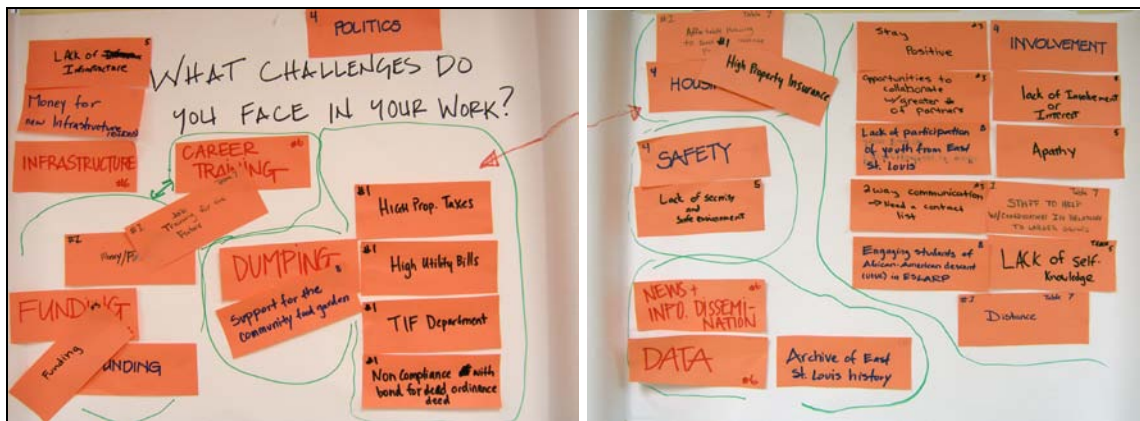


Figure 1: The collection of the top 5 challenges from each group, reorganized into common issues for further discussion.

- **Financial Resources:** Funding was frequently included as a top challenge, with needs for operating funds, emergency funds, information about funding resources, and grant writing assistance.
- **Community Concerns:** A wide range of concerns emerged that included jurisdictional concerns, illegal dumping, housing and property maintenance, nutrition and health, youth mentoring, and safety.
- **Education and Training:** Many people are concerned about access to educational opportunities and job training, both for youth and adults.

Clearly these challenges express a range of concerns from the scale of the individual to the city at large. Discussing these challenges provided the background and discussion needed to shift towards what the ESLARP partnership might seek to address in the future.

Summary of Desires for Partnership in Next Five Years

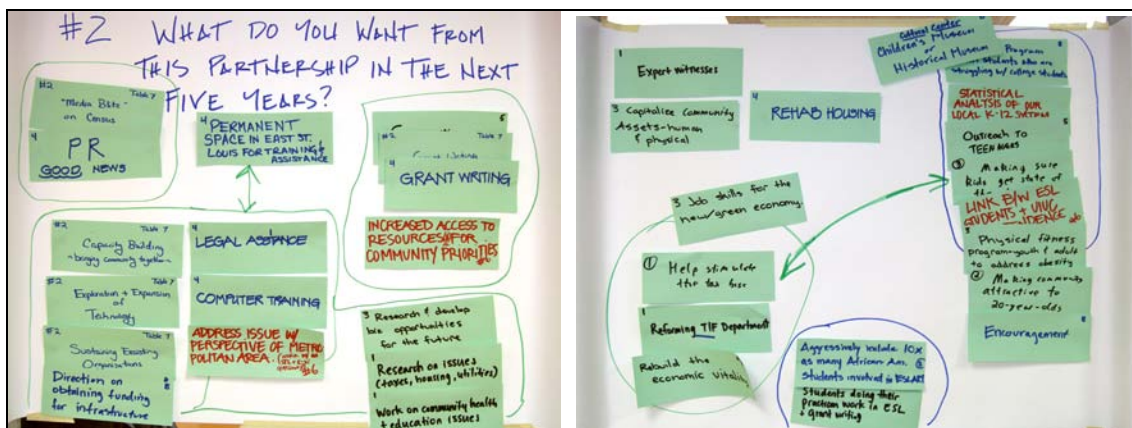


Figure 2: The collection of the top 5 desires for the partnership in the next 5 years, reorganized and discussed further to develop key themes.

Discussion about future directions for the partnership was very lively. Many people reaffirmed the desire for university support and technical assistance. In comparing the previous discussion of challenges with the list of possible future work, discussion led to some key themes to explore:

- Increasing Community Awareness and Involvement: The partnership has potential to engage more people, including youth, and to facilitate sharing “good news” and positive PR about work being done in East St. Louis.
- Information Dissemination: Through the various partnerships established between the university and community organizations, ESLARP can serve as a hub for information, a connection between community groups, and a resource for networking. One important aspect of information dissemination is sharing community history and pride.
- Supporting Research on Relevant Topics: Community organizations and residents have identified areas for possible research, particularly housing, education, and neighborhoods and open space. Faculty and student research in these areas would provide important information that might be beneficial in grant writing and planning future work.
- Capacity Building: The desire for training, business development, planning, and other forms of organizational support are important for the future of the partnership.

It has taken some time to process all the information that was provided at our meeting. Since then, there have been many changes – nationally, statewide, locally, and at the university. It is important that we continue with the sense of shared purpose and faith in great work ahead.

We’ve continued to work through this information by doing our own inventory of possible campus resources to bring into the work we do. We have many departments and centers on campus that may need to be “introduced” to ESLARP and East St. Louis. There are many new potential partnerships to facilitate. We are also looking into possible grants to support more student and research engagement in East St. Louis. We want to continue this strategic planning process in the near future once we have a clearer idea of possible new resources and opportunities.

We thank the residents of East St. Louis for their participation in this meeting and look forward to our ongoing work to make strong partnerships between the University of Illinois and East St. Louis organizations, agencies, and residents.