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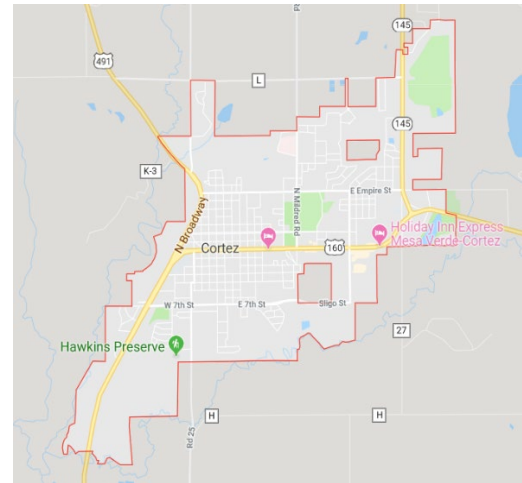


Involving Underserved Populations in Community Planning in Cortez, Colorado

Challenge

The city of Cortez is a rural town in southwestern Colorado with a population of roughly 9,000. Approximately one-third of the community is comprised of Hispanics/Latinos and Native Americans, including the Ute Mountain Ute reservation to the city's south and the nearby Navajo reservation and Tribal lands. Main Street/U.S. Highway 160 and Broadway/U.S. Highway 49 run perpendicular through Cortez, with most of the city's commercial establishments located on these two highways.

In 2011, city officials and planners began updating Cortez's land use code and Access Control Plan. The city recognized that residents who would be significantly affected by the updates were also underserved voices in local decision making, such as low-income communities, ethnic minorities, youth, and seniors. Historically, Cortez faced the obstacle of mistrust with its Hispanic/Latino populations, particularly with law enforcement and local government. The Cortez Community Council developed a proposal for the Orton Family Foundation's [Heart and Soul](#) grant to focus on long range planning and broad community engagement.



Map of Cortez. Image source: Google Maps

Community Engagement Approach

The Orton Family Foundation awarded the city of Cortez the \$100,000 Heart and Soul planning grant to better engage traditionally underserved populations using the Heart and Soul outreach model. The model consists of four phases: 1) gather key stakeholders to help organize community involvement; 2) conduct outreach events to hear and share residents' stories about the city; 3) identify opportunities to incorporate local input into decisions; and 4) follow through with project priorities that reflect the community's interests and values.



New Cortez gateway entrance sign with a lizard representing the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, located on South Broadway/US Hwy 491. Image source: Google Maps

[Public outreach activities](#) included community meetings through potlucks and block parties in neighborhoods with low-income and minority residents, a photo exhibition featuring images of Cortez collected by residents, as well as surveys and meetings with individual community stakeholders. The city [increased youth participation](#) by granting full voting privileges to high school students on the Parks and Recreation, Golf, and Library advisory boards. Cortez also hired a well-known and trusted member of the Hispanic/Latino community to translate between English and

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Spanish at in-person meetings. This strategy helped individuals who felt uncomfortable participating in local board meetings to overcome their reluctance of engaging with officials.

The city proactively incorporated the feedback received through the Heart and Soul process into future projects. City planners collaborated with Hispanic/Latino and Native American community members to collect input on designs for gateway entrance signs along the major highways entering Cortez, providing an opportunity for community members to express their cultural values through context sensitive signage.

Local feedback also emphasized the importance of culturally sensitive beautification across the city and safety improvement priorities, especially on the main thoroughfares. Residents expressed concern about street design and high-speed vehicles on U.S. Highway 160 along the central business district in downtown Cortez. As a result, the city incorporated traffic calming measures into their [2015 Access Control Plan \(ACP\)](#), including pedestrian refuge islands, raised medians, Americans with Disabilities compliant ramps, and rapid rectangular flashing beacons at pedestrian crossing locations. Other transportation improvement projects included median renovations, repaving, and streetlight upgrades along U.S. Highway 491, which were funded in partnership with the Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT).

The positive outcomes resulting from the Heart and Soul project motivated the City Council to mirror the approach in its engagement with the business community for later phases of the ACP. The city held town-hall meetings and individual interactions with business owners who expressed concerns about customer traffic diversion and business interruption, clarifying misconceptions about planned improvements. Due to proactive community engagement, the project was accelerated, and did not experience delays which was common on previous access control plans and construction projects in Cortez.



Median and streetlight improvements in Cortez. Image source: Google Maps

Conclusion

Cortez's holistic public engagement efforts helped address issues commonly faced by small, rural towns and established long term mechanisms for ongoing engagement. Cortez held over 30 public engagement events between 2012 and 2014, gathering input that influenced several transportation projects beyond the original scope of the grant. In 2016, the city signed an [Intergovernmental Agreement with CDOT](#) allowing the ACP to supersede State requirements, which strengthens the implementation of the ACP by ensuring that future work along U.S. Highway 160 aligns with community priorities. City staff continued to integrate the Heart and Soul process into their decision-making process to maintain its ongoing relationships and outreach while continuously looking for opportunities to engage with residents, especially its low-income, Hispanic, and Native American populations. An important lesson learned was to allow stakeholders to lead public hearings for the [land use code](#) update, which the City Council adopted in 2019. These outcomes ultimately helped to improve safety and quality of life for underserved populations and the community of Cortez as a whole.

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