Giving Business a Voice: Considering Equitable and Authentic Engagement in Aspen, CO

CHALLENGE STATEMENT //

The City of Aspen’s government has been historically challenged in communicating with businesses, particularly when policies are changing, or new projects are being tested and/or implemented. At these early and initial Council meetings, it is common that there is little participation by businesses. At the end of the political process however, they show up and are often against the project or policy. This can lead to negative or angry exchanges that may be aimed to halt the entire policy/project. This process is clearly not the best way to initiate change downtown for maximum business community buy-in, yet staff has a difficult time getting participation from the business community until closer to the end of the decision-making process. There is a need for City transparency, trust, and business engagement.

The City would like to get business participation early and often to create success for everyone. The City needs systems to ensure adequate representation from key groups beyond Aspen voters. Many business owners and managers do not live within City limits and therefore are not a primary audience for Council policy changes. Many feel they do not have a voice in the process. Therefore, the challenge is three-fold: how to communicate more effectively with businesses; how to engage them before policies and projects are even created; and how to offer business owners who are not voters a voice in the process that is real and authentic. In addition, the businesses in downtown Aspen have a myriad of desires and needs for communication, but commonly, social media is not embraced. There have been mixed results with social media or newer methods of communication.

The problem that the City of Aspen faces is how to engage with local businesses and include them in the policy process. The solution to the challenge is to create an “advisory board” that includes businesses.
BACKGROUND INFORMATION //

Aspen is a small city of approximately 6,600 residents, a number that swells by 30,000 during high tourist season in winter and summer. Its residents, businesses, and guests expect and receive world class amenities from the City, like trails, recreation center, performing arts, transportation system, and downtown beauty. The community also offers unparalleled arts, culture, and recreational opportunities, a distinguishing element for a town this size. To have a robust service industry, many employees either live in affordable housing in Aspen or commute between 12 and 70 miles from down valley. Aspen’s business community is diverse and is made up of a mixture of locally owned businesses, small chains and a selection of luxury chain stores. The three primary brick and mortar businesses are: retail, restaurants, and lodges. The downtown core where these businesses operate is a mere sixteen blocks in size.

When it comes to city policy and planning, consensus is rare in Aspen, among its voters and its businesses. Many public votes result in a 51% to 49% split, illustrating that Aspen is divided and sometimes those divisions aren’t just a difference of minor issues (which sometimes they are), but more often the differences can be polar. City Council representatives change over time and this could indicate that which audience they prioritize may also change over time. There are political implications and challenges when a City does not acknowledge who its constituents really are. Is it just the residential voters? Or are the local businesses an audience, too?

In terms of media and communication, Aspen is a media-saturated town with two free daily newspapers, one public radio station, several commercial radio stations, two public access cable TV channels, and one locally programmed commercial TV channel. However, social media remains limited. There is also no consistent system to communicate with local businesses to keep them engaged in City efforts. The City is searching for the most effective way to communicate with its various audiences, including the business community, so that plans, policies and initiatives (and their implications) are clear and understood by all parties at the beginning of the process, rather than at the end.

Population: 6,600

Stakeholders + Partners:
- Public Sector: City of Aspen; City Council; Local Politicians; New City Manager
- Private Sector: Aspen Chamber Resort Association (ACRA)
- Communications: Local Media
- Residents
- Local Businesses
- Local Employees

Assets:
- Business Renewal Licenses
- Aspen Chamber Resort Association (ACRA)
- Reputation of Place
- Community outreach platform on City website

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF STUDIO WORKSHOP //

Discussion Questions:
1. How can the City of Aspen engage with local businesses in policy discussions throughout the process (beginning, middle and end)?
2. How can the City design a kinder dialogue that supports a difference of opinions?
3. How does the City of Aspen Develop a Communications Plan that discusses policy?
4. What strategies for communication would improve the City’s track record when it comes to transparency and inclusion of business voices?
5. Does the business community need to form a coalition to have a more singular voice with the City and City Council? Does the framework for such a coalition already exist? What is the role of the Aspen Chamber within this?
6. The reality for the City of Aspen is that Aspen is a tourist economy built on skiing and visitation. The City of Aspen is defined as a “community” that is interconnected that includes: Tourism, employees, commuters, residents. How are all these voices balanced by the City?

**Studio Workshop Overview:**

- **Community and Audiences:** How does Aspen define its community?
- **Equity:** What is plan to ensure the voices on the committee are diverse and truly representative of the stakeholders?
- **Systems and Processes:** How can the City create systems and processes within project management, measurement and indicator tracking, reporting out, and reporting in?
- **Communication and Outreach:** How can the City develop and implement a communications plan that engages and educates various audiences?
- **Business Representation and Engagement:** How can businesses have a voice and an ear when it comes to representation with the City of Aspen?
- **Findings and Ideas**
- **Desired Outcomes**
- **Next Steps**
COMMUNITY //

How does Aspen define its “community?” The reality is that this is a tourist economy that is built on skiing and visitation. The place-branding and identity rightfully reflect this. However, when it comes to City policies, who are those policies for? Residents? Businesses? Commuters? Visitors? What does “quality of life” mean for Aspen and for who? These answers are a little unclear and in need of a vision.

COMMUNITY VISION: Does the City have a vision or mission statement so that we all have the same goal in mind as it relates to the community? This would be an opportune time with a new City Manager to create such a vision statement with a clear goal so that community members are not caught off-guard by policy decisions or directions. There needs to be a strategic vision and plan that doesn’t change with City Council Changes. The goals and visions in the 2012 Comprehensive Plan include both a vibrant and diverse tourism economy AND a strong year-round community. Beyond these visions, what is the shared City’s community vision and especially its related process? What is the role of community input for the community vision? How should the City engage the community early on to help with a shared vision as opposed to the community only being reactive?

AUDIENCE: It is important to identify who the City’s audience is (i.e. local residents, businesses, commuters, employees, etc.). Do we understand each group? What is important to each group? Where do groups’ values and needs overlap? How do groups benefit from one another, but my not be aware of it? (i.e. is there a way to show how having successful businesses help build a sustainable community enabling a critical mass of year-round residents). What are the measurable impacts of each group? Do certain audiences take priority to the City? Who should be the City’s primary audience? Who is a place for? Who is the obligation to? Is it everyone who lives, works, and visits here? The City’s audience(s) needs to be clarified.

EQUITY //

It is important for the City to understand the role of equity as it engages with various audiences in its community. There is an opportunity to create a system of equity, strategically framing this also as an opportunity for new systems. A question to keep in mind is, “Is this a win-win for the individual, the organization, and the community?”

As in many cities, there is a ‘class divide’ in Aspen. Rather than tip-toeing around this issue, there is a chance to build systems of equity, acknowledging the existing foundation of ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots.’ How can all stakeholders have a true stake in the game? How can the City include local businesses and their employees, both of which contribute to the community, even though they may not be full-time residents? Various audiences need a vote in their community and an opportunity to live where they work. For example, many restaurant and retail owners and employees do not have the means to afford to live in Aspen and must commute in. 80% of local business owners do not live in the city. What are the strategies or programs for employee or workforce housing in Aspen?

SYSTEMS + PROCESSES //

Questions:

• How will the City of Aspen build systems and processes that engage business owners, encourage trust, and provide an outlet for real, honest communication with government?
• How can the City and its stakeholders develop a process for bottom-up engagement so that businesses are a part of the dialogue from the beginning?
• How can the City build consensus and think of the greater business community instead of one-off individual concerns?
• What project management systems can the City put into place when they don’t have the additional resources to do so?
• How can the City as an organization reflect upon past mistakes and successes?

Actions:

1- City reporting/measuring/communicating out

Inherent in the City’s mission is to create and enhance quality of life. To get towards this mission when it comes to local businesses, the City of Aspen should adopt strategies (within systems, processes, project management) to become transparent and own where the City needs to improve, along with owning their wins. The City should govern in such a way that businesses are included as major stakeholders as policy is created and/or projects are developed.

2- Businesses reporting/measuring/communicating in

We only manage what we measure. How does the City measure what it is doing well or not? Are their new indicators of success that this project could measure? For example, what is the indicator of ‘quality of life’ or ‘success’ when it comes to businesses? There is an opportunity to communicate the proper measurement and knowing the true situation- i.e. how the city’s businesses are really doing (innate nature to boast when asked instead of admitting any weaknesses.) If businesses had a safe space to share their weaknesses and challenges, everyone would benefit. Measurement should define the actual problems the businesses are having!

It will build trust in government if constituents can see what is happening (or not happening). There should be an honest acknowledgment of both the good and the bad, and a level of transparency built into communication.

COMMUNICATIONS + OUTREACH //

Ultimately, the best outcome would be the acknowledgment that all the stakeholders are valued voices in the process and even if a policy or project is implemented that not everyone is on board with, at least people felt informed, engaged with, and felt their voices were heard.

There should be a basic understanding of each side, with true storytelling behind the people and businesses, within context. Keys include two-way communication and in-advance of initiatives and plans. There should actually be constant storytelling from all sides, not only before a project. There also needs to be an understanding of the factual context of figures, policies and programs: how do all these things happen? The City could show the dots connecting the various audience and sectors. There could also be an analysis matrix of business success indicators so all sides can see what is actually happening. There needs to be an understanding of the various populations who love and operate in Aspen: how can we see what they care about, how they intersect and how they are different?

Design a communications plan that engages and educates:

- Create a communication plan for working with Aspen business community that is robust and aligned with how City policies and projects are formed and implemented;
- Communicate with impact and have a 70% or higher participation from Aspen businesses;
- Create a communication plan for working with Aspen business community that is robust and aligned with how City policies and projects are formed and implemented;
- Communicate citywide policies—what the city does and why, i.e., why parking turnover and dynamic pricing are good for commerce in the core;
- Develop an effective business outreach plan;
- Address perceptions along with facts.

Methods of implementing a communications plan:

- Use a variety of communication platforms to reach the most users.
- It needs to be reliable, consistent, and provide an opportunity for back and forth dialogue. Different technologies will attract different groups. The City needs to go beyond the City website, though that should still be kept up to date.
  - Banners on the City’s webpage
  - Bang the Table’s platform: Aspen Community Voice
  - Next Door, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram
  - Local newspaper
  - Councilpersons’ individual social media accounts
- If we reframe/revamp, CCLA, could that group highlight different City policies for other local businesses on social media? (i.e., the “why,” about the businesses, etc.)
- Encourage more people in the business community to become involved and active.
- Engage the City’s communication team and even enhance it with additional staff (intern, volunteer).

Messaging and Storytelling:

- Provide the context between business and people.
- Listen patiently to each side without being judgmental or defensive.
- Be mindful of the vision and mission of the city: Is the city embracing its identity or role as a tourist town? Does it want economic vibrancy? Is it afraid of change and willing to accept stagnation and exclusivity?
- Focus on involvement and informing businesses in process from the beginning to avoid the perception or reality of things “sneaking up” on them.

BUSINESS REPRESENTATION //

How can businesses have a voice and an ear when it comes to representation with the City of Aspen? Ideas include:

- Revamp CCLC into a citizen business advocacy group. This could be honed even more specifically into a “Small Business Advisory Committee.” This would build trust amongst parties and help create a healthy business environment. The business community needs their own arm since they do not currently have a vote and the existing “top-down approach” is not working.
- Examine ways to leverage business renewals with local businesses as a communication platform and data-sharing mechanism that goes in both directions.
- Develop a “Adopt a Local Business” Program.
- Create and maintain a contact list of all businesses.
- Be sure to gather all community input before any strategic plans.
- Look into the creation of a Downtown Development Authority (DDA) at some point.

Small Business Advisory Committee:
Are there ways to get creative with physical spaces as a way to reshape meeting times, locations and interactions? The Advisory Committee enfranchises the business owners who are not necessarily voters or residents. The process for incorporating feedback as not as evident would be helpful. The communication and promotion of the dashboard will heavily influence the impacts and successes of this effort. It would be great to include information about learning over time, how to incorporate feedback and data from surveys, and how the effort will adapt to improve continuously. The outcomes of trust, financial/business improvement should have a clearer mechanism for measurement.

The committee could advocate on behalf of the local businesses. For example, they could go to City and advocate for policies that could support businesses (i.e. FAR restrictions, rents, employee housing). This committee would be the dedicated representative for the businesses to advocate for the small businesses in town and to share what is happening with the City (in a way that is not swayed by conflicting allegiances).

**Existing Representation:**

Currently, there are various organizations with different groups that they represent.

- **City:** Residents
- **ACRA:** arts and culture, housing, business services, government, lodging, nonprofit, real estate, recreation, religious, restaurants & nightlife, shopping, transportation, wedding & event service
- **Rotary:** service organization
- **CCLC:** not active/not working
- **City Council:** there are not wards or districts; citywide representation
- **Small Business Advisory Group:** need a new entity such as this to represent and advocate for the business community

ACCRA is an important partner. There may be an opportunity for this organization to supplement services of the new small business group by holding events that connect Council Members with businesses, i.e. a monthly lunch or happy hour. ACCRA is funded the City (somewhat of a conflict of interest) and is membership-based, so not all businesses are members. There needs to be an inclusive representing body. This is why many other cities have a chamber along with either a business association, business partnership, or downtown authority.

How can the City and other community partners (such as the ones listed above) support the creation of a new business group? What support or partnership could the City and ACCRA provide? Are there support roles for college interns or AmeriCorps VISTAs? Could a City staffet get paid to lead such an effort? A DDA could be a strong political arm and natural fit for such an organization.

Initial first steps could include a contact list of businesses, a listserv, and some type of informal structure with business leaders.

Ideally, the City of Aspen would come out of this project with a strategic plan or roadmap for how to: Govern in such a way that businesses are included as major stakeholders as policy is created and/or projects are developed.

- Define and engage the businesses in such a way that they have a voice and a seat at the table, and in such a way that they have a mechanism to be proactive and suggest their own projects and policies they would like the City to consider.
- On the soft side, the outcome would lead to honest and constructive feedback throughout a policy or project plan from the City and businesses. Also, Aspen would foster an environment where the overall relationship between the City and businesses is positive with support felt from both sides toward one another. It would advantageous if the community were on board with the solution. Realistically, we cannot have agreement...
on everything. The council may want things the businesses want but the community doesn’t want or any combination of this triad.

Clarify what the investment is on a community-wide level and what the impacts will be. The presentation could better outline the proposed impacts and results. The importance of this investment is a division of haves and have-nots and continued degradation of the relationship. Focus on the strong message around individual groups feeling heard.

**FINDINGS + IDEAS //**

**Engaging City of Aspen businesses**
- Opportunities: Design a communications plan that has a vision
- Build consensus on the definition of community
- Perform audits focused on parking
- Develop a data dashboard

**Community Engagement- Buy-In**
- The City of Aspen will focus on adopting strategies that support transparency
- The City of Aspen will examine ways to leverage business license renewals to help understand current and future business conditions
- Design a program where City Council members are meeting with local businesses and building relationships

**Developing Priorities and Identifying Solutions**
- Design a data dashboard
- Establish a “citizen advisory group” that includes business representatives and determine leadership/staffing of the group
- Build capacity that supports a communications outreach plan

**DESIRED OUTCOMES //**

1. By designing a data dashboard, the City of Aspen businesses will have data that illustrates the ebbs and flows of parking. This will aid city officials to support local businesses by enforcing parking regulations.

2. By establishing a “citizen advisory group” that includes local business the business leaders will have an opportunity to be part of the policy process.

3. By understanding the definition of “community” the City of Aspen now understands that “community” is interconnected. The design of a strategic plan will aid in reflecting this interconnection. As such, this will provide a clear vision for staff to provide facts on policy so that City Council can establish policies that supports the business community of Aspen.
**NEXT STEPS //**

**STEP ONE**: Design a data dashboard.

**STEP TWO**: Establish a “citizen advisory board” that includes business representatives/business owners.

**STEP THREE**: Leverage business license renewals to help understand current and future business conditions. Build capacity that supports a communications outreach plan.

**DETAILED ACTIONS:**

- **May-June 2019**: Parking data sharing
  - Put parking messaging and data dashboard on website.

- **June 2019**: Mitch and Mitzy Reach out to Sara
  - Perhaps provide governance recommendations to the new city manager, i.e. create a position for an economic development staff person
  - Orient the new City Council persons to the needs of Aspen businesses

- **November 2019**: Prepare Data Survey and Collection Tools
  - Be prepared to survey businesses along with business license renewal in January 2020
  - Decide what survey questions to ask the businesses.
    - What can the City do to help your business?
    - Do you trust the government? (and can benchmark over time)
    - NRC has a list of business questions – she could chat w Mitch.
    - PUMA also has experience conducting surveys.
    - What do retailers want to share w city?
    - What questions should be same as ones we ask residents? (compare/contrast)
  - Realistic goal setting
    - Populate the City Database
    - Roles: Who will review/manage metrics? Mitch for now. He can present results to new leadership and council
    - Ongoing: Annual; Performance measurement/ benchmarking data (beginning of each year)
  - Need to be proactive to get the non-engaged persons/businesses involved and aware that City wants to listen and use their input.

- **April 2020**: Create a new voice for business advocacy
  - Success would be a new version of “CCLC” (commercial core and lodging commission)- however, a complete re-do of this group- More of a citizen business advisory group to advice City Council and represent business voice
    - Include a City Staff rep (Mitch, Mitzy and her staff), City Council Member
    - Mitch to meet with ACCRA on what this looks like
    - Organize regular meetings between City and business; City Council Rep with a Lunch (Look at what other DDAs or business groups do)
      - i.e. Loveland DDA holds monthly public meetings, business alliance lunches, presentations or Q/A discussions, responds to and integrates stakeholder concerns, Reach-Outs, Reach-Ins
      - i.e. Eagle’s community resources
• i.e. Estes Park and Carbondale DCI advisory panels: how they educated elected officials about what was working or not

• Ongoing: Think of ways to integrate process into City Communications Plan

TEAM MEMBERS //

Jeff Bello, University of Colorado Denver, School of Public Affairs Dec 2018
Cole Judge, Senior Associate, Progressive Urban Management Associates (P.U.M.A.)
Mitch Osur, City of Aspen
Mitzi Rapkin, City of Aspen Communications
Rob Itner, Restaurant Rep, ACRA
Lisa Lamay, Retail Rep, ACRA
Debbie Braun, ACRA
Heather Hemp, ACRA
Kenny Smith
Donny
Wendy Mitchell, Meat & Cheese
Kathleen W, PR Studio
COLORADO CHALLENGE PROGRAM OVERVIEW //

The Colorado Challenge Accelerator Program is a unique team building accelerator focused on establishing a plan of work and proposal that engages public, private, and non-profit partners to address a significant community challenge over the course of twelve months. The Colorado Challenge works to transform the community’s challenge into an opportunity, to establish a proposal, financing approach, and team of community partners ready to implement. The program includes five phases of planning and development that will help our Colorado communities establish a plan for community-wide initiatives to foster sustainable community and economic development including public, private, and non-profit partners moving forward as a business-friendly destination for entrepreneurs and community initiatives.

Downtown Colorado, Inc. will continue working with Colorado Challenge Communities around the followings areas to drive progress in turning the Trinidad Challenge into an Opportunity.

- Financing Approach: Developing and presenting the proposal to a funders network for feedback and guidance. In the process, the participating communities are connected with supporting resources and networks to help them get the job done.
- Program Continuation: Coaching and referrals through the project financing and implementation phases.

We invite all partners to continue working in this challenge as we move into deeper exploration and implementation phases.