



Community Dinners

Downtown Madison, Inc.
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Overview

Community dinners are events in which community members come together over a shared meal. These events serve many purposes, including community building, economic development, and relationship building. The community dinner model is highly scalable and can be catered to fit a wide variety of goals. Dinners can be held within community groups like churches or schools but can also be held community wide. Often, multiple goals can be combined and met through a single event. Two of the most common goals are community building and economic development.

Community building: Community dinners are often utilized as a community-building tool. By hosting a community dinner, organizers can bring together those members of a community who may otherwise not have the opportunity to interact. Dinners may be facilitated around a specific issue or geared toward a particular topic. Dinners may also be informal, leaving guests to mingle at their leisure.

Economic development: In addition to providing a place for the community to come together, community dinners may be employed as an economic development tool. Sometimes, a business district or economic development group will organize a community dinner showcasing local restaurants and businesses. In these cases, attendees are often required to purchase tickets. The event can serve to grow awareness of local businesses and encourage patronage to local restaurants.

This report highlights four successful community dinner programs from around the country, each servicing different goals. Although each event focuses on a shared meal, each approaches the concept very differently. By looking at these four cases, we can see how community dinners can be a powerful tool to bring people together, foster community, and support the local economy.

Examples

Longest Table | Grand Forks, North Dakota

The Longest Table is an event organized by the Community Foundation of Grand Forks, East Grand Forks & Region, and the Greater Grand Forks Young Professionals. In this event, community members gather along a long table for a free dinner and spend the evening conversing with those around them. The goal of the Longest Table is to bring the community together to "foster stronger connections, exchange stories, discuss community challenges, and spur civic innovation." This event has now seen two iterations in Grand Forks. In 2018, conversations were meant to share ideas and build community, and in 2019 this event was used to gather input for future master planning in the area. In both years, hundreds of conversations were collected and summarized to provide data points on the community's hopes and perceptions.

In its first iteration, attendees were asked about their agreement with six statements designed to gauge their perceptions of the community. Discussions were facilitated over dinner, and attendees were asked to respond to the same questions following the discussion. The results show that each of the six statements saw an improvement in perception following these conversations. In 2019 the event was paired with a survey used to inform the University Corridor plan, an underdeveloped corridor connecting campus and downtown Grand Forks. The tables were located in the center of the study area, allowing participants to experience the space while they talked and envisioned possibilities. Question cards were given to a "table captain" to help facilitate conversations centered on community issues and opportunities.

Outcomes

In 2018, the event drew 717 residents to a 750-foot table. In 2019, attendance grew to 868 participants, and the length of the table increased to 1,250 ft. In both cases, the resulting conversations were collected and organized into Microsoft Power BI dashboards. The dashboards organized common themes, allowing users to toggle between data points by a range of population variables, including age, gender, and length of time spent in the community. These dashboards visualize how the city is perceived differently by different types of residents. They also provide aggregate insight into the key hopes and concerns of participants. These dashboards are published online and available to the public.

During the 2019 event, the city also launched a city-funded micro-grant program. The city has provided \$24,000 in funding for grants of up to \$3,000 each for residents to launch their ideas for building a better community. Ten grant recipients were ultimately selected.

Projects include an outdoor jam lot, murals, a specialized nutrition education program, and a program for free tickets to theatre performances for homebound seniors.

Logistics

This event is free and open to all; however, preregistration is required. Guests are seated randomly along the table but may request to sit with one specific person. Larger parties can not be sat together, as the event's purpose is to mingle outside one's immediate social circle. Children under 12 are welcome but must register with an accompanying adult. The menu is provided by local grocers and includes gluten-free and vegetarian options. Dinner is served following opening remarks by event staff. The venue also accommodates free parking and has alternate space available in the case of inclement weather. Reservations are made through Eventbrite.

To construct the table, staff organized 125 individual tables to form an uninterrupted table spanning 1,250 feet. A grant from the Knight Foundation secured funding for food. The event was further funded by local entities, including the City of Grand Forks and Hugo's. The event utilized nearly 175 volunteers to find and place tables and chairs, create surveys to measure perceptions, block off streets, and reach out to people who do not typically engage in civic conversations. The team operated with a seven-step workflow:

1. Create a planning team.
2. Assemble table captains to guide and facilitate conversations.
3. Attract a diverse set of residents.
4. Administer a survey to measure perceptions and desired solutions.
5. Compile and analyze the data.
6. Continue to elevate the data and outcomes to influence civic decision-making.
7. Use micro-grants to activate average citizens as leaders to influence government and implement solutions.

For replication, organizers recommend placing the table in an opportunity area such as the city center. This placement can draw attention to possibilities and activate citizens. The program has been successfully replicated elsewhere, including in North Dakota and Minnesota. A toolkit is currently in development to aid in future program replication.

More information: <https://www.longesttablegf.com/>



Description: Longest Table, 2018
Photo Courtesy of Longest Table Grand Forks



Description: A conversation during Longest Table
Photo Courtesy of the International Downtown Association



Description: Longest Table, 2019
Photo Courtesy of the Grand Forks Herald

Mildred Council Annual Community Dinner | Orange County, North Carolina

Each year, the Mildred Council Community Dinner is held in Orange County, North Carolina. The event was started by Mildred “Mama Dip” Council, an icon in southern cooking and founder of Dip's Kitchen in Chapel Hill. Mildred created the annual dinner to celebrate the community’s cultural diversity. The event is described as "a community-building event, crossing economic, racial, religious and ethnic barriers and presenting a wealth of wonderful, culturally diverse food and entertainment from our own community." In 2014, the annual event was awarded a National League of Cities award for cultural diversity. Currently, the event is facilitated by Orange County Human Relations Commission NC.

Outcomes

The community dinner serves to bring people together from all parts of the community to share a meal and meet other people they would not normally encounter. During the 21st annual dinner in 2018, nearly 500 people from various cultural and social-economic groups participated. With the support of donations, sponsorships, and volunteer hours, over 50% of the tickers were underwritten.

Logistics

Each year, the event's menu is coordinated by Mildred Council's family in partnership with local restaurateurs. Appetizers, sides, and desserts are donated by local restaurants and churches, allowing attendees to sample food from local restaurants across the community. The event is made possible through three levels of sponsorship and placemat ad sales to local merchants. The event is held at a school cafeteria, with ample space and kitchen infrastructure. Through donations, tickets are made available to those who might not otherwise be able to afford attendance. The event is made zero-waste in coordination with Orange County Solid Waste. Through the Fork it Over program, steel tableware is borrowed from local community groups and washed and returned for use by other groups. Entertainment is provided by local musicians, theatre companies, and entertainment groups that share stories showcasing the community’s diversity. A Spanish translator is available during the event, and promotional materials are provided in English, Spanish, Karen, and Chinese. In addition to donations, the event is put on by volunteers.

More information: <http://communitydinner.org/>



*Description: Mildred Council Annual Community Dinner Event
Photo Courtesy of Jackie Helvey via The Community Dinner*



*Description: Performers at the Mildred Council Annual Community Dinner
Photo Courtesy of Jackie Helvey via The Community Dinner*

On the Table | Chicago, Illinois

On the Table is an annual event organized by the Chicago Community Trust. Rather than facilitate a single meal or location, the forum invites participants from diverse backgrounds to gather over a series of mealtime conversations spent building personal relationships and exploring pressing issues facing Chicago. Both individuals and organizations can join On the Table conversations or host their own. The purpose of the forum is to explore concrete ways to build community and move the city forward. This past year, On the Table was held in collaboration with the Illinois Department of Human Services' Healing Illinois initiative. The initiative was launched to continue the work of racial healing in the state of Illinois and provides 4.5 million dollars in grant funding to organizations working to build a more equitable state.

Outcomes

Each year the event draws thousands of community members to conversation tables across the city. In 2014, the first series drew 11,000 participants. Through the many conversations happening simultaneously, participants can discuss what is important to them in the community and identify priorities. In the first year, six central ideas arose from the conversations happening around these tables. By collecting information about these conversations, the Trust was then able to support community members in advancing their ideas for progress. The event also serves to celebrate the stories of individuals who make the community strong and inspire others to join. The forum also aims to promote action by providing a way to connect the thousands of conversations happening around the city.

Logistics

Participation is open to anyone; however, registration is required. Anyone interested in hosting an event can register on the Trust's website. An event is an individual conversation in which a host invites 10-12 of their friends or neighbors to join them for a discussion about community. This can happen in someone's home, a restaurant, a church, etc. While these conversations traditionally have been held around a table, many have moved online in response to the coronavirus pandemic over the past year. The Trust collects as much data as possible from these various conversations through surveys and social media to report back to the community. This tracking both allows the Trust to amplify the conversations happening around the table and promote action on the issues they discuss.

More information: <https://onthetable.com/>



*Description: On the Table Event
Photo Courtesy of LoganSquarist*



*Description: On the Table Event
Photo Courtesy of The Chicago Community Trust*



*Description: On the Table Event
Photo Courtesy of The Chicago Community Trust*

Savor the Avenue | Delray Beach, Florida

This annual event offers a four-course dining experience in downtown Delray Beach. During this event, thousands of guests dine along a 1,320 ft table spanning five blocks. The event is put on by Delray and Boca Raton magazines and the Delray Beach Downtown Development Authority. Each year the event partners with a charitable organization to share proceeds. This year, for example, 5% of total proceeds will be donated to Community Greening, a local charity. Contests like those for best table décor accompany the dining. Guests are encouraged to dress according to each restaurant's theme or motif.

Outcomes

In 2019, the event welcomed 1,001 dining guests as well as several thousand spectators. In the same year, the total economic impact of the event was assessed at \$128,403. The organization boasts over 100 thousand media impressions and extensive brand exposure for the downtown businesses, the City of Delray Beach, and event partners. Since its first year, over \$70,000 has been donated to local charities, including \$3,110 in 2019 for the Stock Our Schools Campaign.

Logistics

Tickets for this event range from \$95-\$150 per person, with an average cost of \$120 per seat. Guests purchase tickets for individual restaurants, each providing a special menu for the event. In 2019, 14 local restaurants participated. Savor the Avenue guests purchase and sit in the vicinity of their chosen restaurant. Reservations are made directly with the restaurant of choice and are reserved with a credit card. Attendees must check-in with the individual restaurant to be seated, after which they receive an event lanyard and complimentary beverages. Guests are encouraged to park in nearby parking garages. The event utilizes a number of sponsorship packages for funding ranging from \$2,500 silver sponsorships to \$10,000 premier sponsorships. The event is marketed through a combination of street banners, digital marketing efforts, and television ads.

More information: <https://downtowndelraybeach.com/savorthave>



*Description: Annual Savor the Avenue Event
Photo Courtesy of Downtown Delray Beach*



*Description: Savor the Avenue
Photo Courtesy of Downtown Delray Beach*



*Description: Annual Savor the Avenue Event
Photo Courtesy of Downtown Delray Beach*