

Minnesota's *Embrace Open Space* as a case study in collaborative communications

creating COMMON GROUND

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Erika L. Binger, Board Chair, The McKnight Foundation

The McKnight Foundation supports work in many program areas, including efforts to improve the region and communities in which we live. The Foundation's primary activity in this is to make grants to nonprofit organizations, but we also use other tools — convening, research, demonstration projects, and communications — to reach goals in key areas.

In addition, staff and board at McKnight constantly explore new ways to partner with and support the communities we serve. To that end, in 2001 the Foundation invited several McKnight grantees, each already working on open space preservation, to discuss the possibility of uniting around a few common messages that might strengthen the entire field. The result was *Embrace Open Space*, the public information campaign described in this publication.

Never before had our organization undertaken a communications project quite like this one. McKnight’s staff and board, and our grantee-partners, understood from the beginning that the project would require a commitment of several years and that surprises along the way were likely. With eyes wide open and a spirit of innovation, we started a journey that would both challenge us with complex and unexpected tests, and reward us with a newly energized assembly of partners and a refocused sense of community.

From its inception, the campaign focused on two important goals. After four years of conducting a highly visible campaign, the group has made significant progress toward both:

- We have unified key efforts and interests of those already working to protect open space.
- We have influenced how the public discusses the topic, as reflected in news coverage and the deliberations of regional decision makers.

Still, there has been no sweeping victory; open spaces in the Twin Cities remain in need of attention and protection. Social change occurs slowly, and regionwide adoption of policies that truly embrace open space will take years. Because of the campaign, however, our area is much better equipped to drive that process.

With the Embrace Open Space collaboration, we set out to identify “common ground” in the Twin Cities — in stories that unite, in shared values that bring meaning, and in the land whose protection matters to entire communities. But in the process, the collaborators found a need to *create* some common ground: between partners already competing for money and citizen engagement, and among the various communications tactics we were soon to employ.

For everyone involved, the campaign reflects a substantial commitment of time, money, energy, and thought. With this report, we aim to take maximum advantage of those investments by archiving the experience and sharing learned insights with a wider audience. Foundations, nonprofits, and community organizations everywhere may encounter similar opportunities to develop shared communications that support change agendas around a broad range of issues. We hope the lessons we learned from Embrace Open Space can help inform that important work.

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preface

Minneapolis, St. Paul, and the surrounding communities are home to nearly three million people and a dynamic economy. Known for lakes, parks, forests, and farmlands, as well as a highly educated workforce, the region has changed dramatically over the past 40 years — and new development continues at a brisk pace. In fact, the Twin Cities region has been identified as one of the most sprawling in the country. The area is expected to add a million new residents in the next two decades, and already less than six percent of the native landscape remains.

Over the years, persistent efforts have protected important tracts of land to maintain a high quality of life in the Twin Cities and to fight poorly planned or harmful development. Diligent citizens, environmentalists, land conservation groups, and planners have worked hard and have often succeeded. But the momentum of policies that promote

ill-managed growth and limited public involvement far exceeds the capacity of small groups working in isolation to strategize comprehensively.

At the same time, to address the big systems that shape our communities — transportation, housing, land use, growth management — philanthropies across the country have increasingly sought strategies beyond grantmaking that reflect regional interdependence and the economic and social benefits of collaborative planning.

Collaborative planning, however, is almost always easier said than done. When forced to compete for scarce resources, even public interest groups with identical goals face strong incentives to distinguish themselves from their allies, thwarting true collaboration. To develop a more systemic and collaborative approach to related issues, the various players — complete with their unique approaches and internal priorities — must be able to define their own work in ways that recognize common ground. To succeed, each organization must work from within its particular culture and assumptions about the issue.

Case in point, the Embrace Open Space campaign and its disparate host of active partners, for whom even the definition of success is up for debate: For a land trust organization, success may be measured by the total number of acres put into trust. But for a membership-based advocacy group, success might depend on the number of community activists working on the issue. A habitat restoration group could measure success by the habitat quality, not by whether the habitat is protected. And a government body might be most concerned with the fate of specifically identified parcels of land. Furthermore, these differing measures of success embody sometimes competing assumptions about which changes are most desirable and how they should be achieved. And underlying those assumptions are beliefs that are even more fundamental about why the issue is important in the first place — and about who has the greatest stake in its resolution.

By exploring the competing assumptions to redefine issues in broadly inclusive terms, foundations, nonprofit organizations, and community agencies can become centrally positioned to align goals and build on each other's strengths. Once they establish a shared definition, these groups can shift public discourse and support critical policy goals through a communications campaign.

Not all issues lend themselves to large-scale collaborative communications. Success is more likely if a critical mass of organizations is already engaged in the field. A modicum of existing public interest, especially if public policy decisions are imminent, can also increase the potential impact of a campaign.

In the Twin Cities in 2001, several key circumstances fatefully converged to ignite the Embrace Open Space campaign. At that time, The McKnight Foundation supported about a dozen local grantees already working, to varying extents, on open space issues. A major open space referendum was on the docket in one of the fastest-developing metro counties. The Twin Cities' regional planning authority, the Metropolitan Council, was formulating its "Blueprint 2030" plan for the Cities, emphasizing land protection. And research indicated strong public support on the topic of open space protection.

So, with a respectable number of stars seemingly aligned, McKnight's staff invited a handful of grantees to explore the possibility of an overarching communications campaign in support of land protection. Reactions were encouraged — and would become crucial in determining next steps, if there were to be any.

With McKnight playing a central role in some stimulating early meetings, the grantees grew excited about the possibilities for cooperation. Still, there was some understandable confusion around goals and strategies: What kind of campaign would this be? What would it do? Who would pay for the campaign and how long would it last? Most important, what would be expected of the grantee organizations, and how might the campaign benefit them?

Regardless of unresolved questions, the grantees were interested. No one left the table, not that day or over the next few years.

It took time and trust-building to develop the campaign, set objectives, and begin to fill in the blanks to every partner's lingering questions. All the players agreed that efforts to influence public awareness and action would require strategic communication via multiple media over a long period of time — in a word, patience. Much of the Foundation's previous media communications had been singularly focused and designed to make a short-term splash in the news, i.e., one article in one newspaper for one day. But

this entire effort would be different. Embrace Open Space would have to build an ongoing wave for enduring impact.

Embrace Open Space's collaborative communications rested on three core elements, which we will explore throughout the remainder of this publication:

a vital partnership

A foundation, a nonprofit organization, or a formal coalition can certainly operate a successful communications campaign on its own. But a true partnership of *diverse* organizations greatly helps to reset public dialogue around an issue. The resulting shared perspective can then be advanced through the activities and communications across all the individual organizations. The unified vision and cooperative relationships engendered by partnership-building are invaluable, long-term benefits.

communications framing

For a campaign of any size to influence public sentiment and policy, its communications need to emerge from a shared, inclusive, and mobilizing story. Creating messages exclusively around "the problem" can exclude those with different specific assumptions about the problem's nature and its appropriate solutions. Better instead to explicitly and intentionally evoke widely shared values, and to frame issues in ways that encourage key communities to see themselves in the story.

creative strategy and tactics

Strategic communications are, by definition, action oriented. For success, an action is required in response to the outgoing messages. The identification of those desired responses, evaluated in relation to clear campaign objectives, lays the foundation for highly targeted, cost-effective tactics. Well-chosen tactics can leverage even a modest budget to effectively engage target audiences.

Embrace Open Space campaign timeline

2001 – 2002

- Initial discussions
- Campaign planning

Year 1: 2002 – 2003

- Campaign launch
- Announcement of original Treasures of Open Space
- Direct mailings
- Print advertising: Round 1
- Champions of Open Space awards program begins

Year 2: 2003 – 2004

- "Unusual suspect" op-eds
- Print advertising: Round 2
- Radio advertising

Year 3: 2004 – 2005

- Campaign administration spreads among partners
- Announcement of five new Treasures of Open Space
- Website review and revamp
- The Last 6%* TV program airs

Year 4: 2005 – 2006

- "Economic Value of Open Space" report
- Campaign administration shifts to one of the original partners

a vital PARTNERSHIP

chapter **ONE** chapter TWO chapter THREE

When an organization sets out to ignite a broad issue-based communications effort, it would do well to start by recognizing opportunities to partner with others working in the field. Sector-specific partners bring needed expertise and experience, and on-the-ground community connections. Their day-to-day work gives them knowledge of the players, the processes, and the politics around relevant issues — as well as the status of existing efforts to find solutions.

It is critical that the campaign's frame and messages be repeated consistently by many different sources, and advocates active in the field will inevitably serve as the campaign's most visible emissaries and spokespersons. Some grantee organizations also bring large memberships, which can become natural allies to engage and extend campaign messages, and all have their own external communications channels. In addition, each group's presence and credibility contribute to the overall public integrity of the campaign.

For these reasons, from the very first discussions of a communications campaign, the plan for Embrace Open Space (EOS) hinged on fostering strong relationships among already active advocacy organizations. The grantees were to be active co-creators, by design and by necessity, and not silent partners. Although genuine cross-partner collaboration in the campaign took time to evolve, The McKnight Foundation never considered carrying the message alone. >

Our initial task, then, was to help create some common ground for this all-important partnership — a time-consuming but immensely valuable endeavor. The partnership itself would be one of the campaign’s most important products. “Before this campaign partnership was formed, there was no forum for regular communication and information sharing among us,” said Scott Elkins, executive director of the Sierra Club North Star Chapter. “That alone has been a great outcome.”

The difficulty of setting a common goal among seemingly like-minded organizations can be substantial. Cooperation requires trust, and trust-building takes time. Constituent partner organizations, although allied in general purpose, are fated to be competitors for resources and attention. Team-building for the Embrace Open Space partners finally occurred as each organization managed to let go of its own agenda just enough to identify and work for a common purpose. The partnership gelled slowly as meetings yielded more and more shared decisions.

connecting the dots

In summer 2001, when McKnight invited several grassroots grantees to explore the notion of a communications campaign, the potential partners were acquainted with one another to varying degrees. A few had worked together on discrete land protection efforts but still weren’t completely familiar with each other’s broader goals or strategies.

Not only was there little history of close cooperation among these groups, but there was also subtle underlying competition. Every grantee organization in the room had its own approach to the issue, its own institutional identity, and its own successful track record. It was unclear how a broad communications campaign could help each achieve its own organizational goals. While all agreed on the possible merits of a cooperative effort, many also quietly recognized their direct competition for financial support and influence.

“Minnesota’s political climate over the past few years has increased competition for funding that’s getting more and more scarce,” said Al Singer, manager of the Dakota County Farmland and Natural Areas Program. “There was great potential for that competition to splinter us, to force us to compete for a smaller pie rather than join forces to try to demand a bigger pie.”

Whitney Clark, executive director of Friends of the Mississippi River, agreed: “Without this campaign, we all would have continued to work in our own niches doing our own things. For us not to have come together in this way would have been very wrong, almost constituting mismanagement. We’re all passionate about the issue, but we needed to be coordinated.”

strengthening individuals to further the group

The Embrace Open Space campaign increased the general ability of each partner to create focused and structured communications to accomplish specific goals, such as mobilizing public engagement in land use planning. “The experience the partners got in communications planning and execution through the campaign has been a real eye-opener,” said Jane Prohaska, executive director of the Minnesota Land Trust. “It’s taught me how communications ought to be done when you’re playing at the top of your game.”

Equally important, the partners also learned how to use a communications campaign as a shared tool, one that could support individual efforts and advance broader goals.

“Small nonprofit organizations seldom have an insider’s view of television production, media relations, website design, and public affairs at this level of complexity, sophistication, and professionalism,” said Dorian Grilley, executive director for the Parks & Trails

Embrace Open Space partners

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1000 Friends of Minnesota | Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy |
| Dakota County Farmland and Natural Areas Program | Minnesota Department of Natural Resources |
| Friends of the Minnesota Valley | Minnesota Land Trust |
| Friends of the Mississippi River | Minnesota League of Conservation Voters |
| Great River Greening | National Park Service Mississippi National River and Recreation Area |
| Metropolitan Council | Parks & Trails Council of Minnesota |
| Metropolitan Design Center (formerly The Design Center for American Urban Landscape) | Sierra Club North Star Chapter |
| | Trust for Public Land |

Council of Minnesota. “What I’ve learned has translated directly into communications decisions and activities at my own organization.”

Other partners confirmed that ripple effect, and described bringing the campaign’s framing work into their own organizations, sparking important dialogues among their own staff or in topic-specific workshops. “As we participated in creating messages here, it was very helpful in thinking about our own messages,” said Cordelia Pierson, program manager for the Trust for Public Land.

commitment leads to ownership

Although the time, the expertise, and the connections of the individual partners were crucial to establish the campaign, the partners’ early relationship to the effort was more that of co-followers than of co-leaders. In part, this was a function of the inherent power dynamics between a major funder and supported grantees. Preexisting financial ties provided understandable motivation for the grantees to hear out the McKnight-driven campaign concept, plus the partners weren’t prepared to spearhead such an effort on their own.

“None of us could have done this by ourselves,” said Jim Erkel, land use and transportation director at the Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy. “Just the

creation of the website was a tremendous outreach asset for us all, and even something like that was far beyond our capacity as individual organizations.”

In the campaign’s early days, the grantees collaborated when collaboration was called for, but incentives for deeper involvement took time and trust to develop. The organizations were already busy with their own broad responsibilities and hadn’t yet seen any campaign benefits that might warrant committing more of their own resources.

“The funding and leadership from McKnight brought us together, and that’s what created this sustained forum,” said Pierson. “It forced us to come up with shared communications priorities for land conservation, and to define what lands are important for communications.”

Within two years, however, the grantees’ engagement level had increased, spurred by several experiences. First, they participated in the campaign’s issue-framing exercises (described in Chapter Two), long and sometimes frustrating meetings where all opinions were aired to build a shared understanding of the issue. The conversations began with opposing voices, struggling to be heard; they concluded with a unified voice and shared goals.

Second, the partners’ roles in the campaign launch events helped deepen their loyalty to the project. The launch events freed grantees from the planning table, and took them (literally) into the field. Months of planning became reality, and feelings of ownership emerged.

Finally, the collaboration solidified through close work over two years with local communications experts. The interactions increased trust among all, and bolstered confidence in the campaign’s strategy and effectiveness. “Embrace Open Space helped our movement get stronger,” said Whitney Clark, “showing us the wisdom and impact of coordinating messages.”

Embrace Open Space’s expenses of almost \$500,000 over the campaign’s first two years were managed through The McKnight Foundation. But as the partnership strengthened at the beginning of year three, the campaign’s management and administration began shifting from the Foundation to various grantees, supported by a two-year grant of

An **advocacy partnership** built around a communications campaign must consider at least four key issues early on:

Partnership. Aim past the short term. Create a partnership strong enough to sustain itself beyond the campaign.

Resources. From day one, be realistic and open about the amount of time and energy required of staff and grantee-partners. Partners must be sufficiently invested to take ownership of the campaign.

Leadership. Even in collaboration, explicitly determine who will lead and whether a leadership transition will be necessary down the line. If so, plan for it.

Duration. To maintain campaign integrity and efficiency, don’t skimp on time needed for meetings to build trust, unify stories, and make shared decisions. Shortcuts can derail relationships or stymie effective planning.

about \$300,000 to one of the partner organizations. And as the Foundation scaled back its direct involvement, the campaign naturally moved into its next phase.

a partnership built to adapt and endure

In 2005, the Embrace Open Space partners published both a report documenting the positive economic value of open space, and the results from a corresponding public opinion survey.

The timing of the report was good on many fronts. The partners recognized that policymakers were increasingly basing decisions on economic costs and benefits. Land conservation advocates needed details to back up the general assertion that open space pays for itself. And local communities starting a new round of comprehensive planning were in need of help to evaluate the local economic and community benefits of land protection.

Without the collaboration, it is unlikely a solo partner would have embarked on such a large study or had the resources to disseminate the findings. The report's findings have proven to be such successful newsmakers and catalysts for action that the participants plan to continue the research and its dissemination in 2006.

In addition to being the year the economic value report was produced, 2005 was a

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pivotal transition year for the collaboration. The McKnight Foundation provided support targeted for organizational development planning. The partners reevaluated their interest, their roles, and their relationship to Embrace Open Space and other collaborative efforts. Many of the partners grew interested in combining Embrace Open Space with another active land conservation collaboration. In 2006, McKnight granted \$375,000 to one of the original partners — Trust for Public Land in St. Paul, Minnesota — to administer the campaign's continuing efforts.

The potential for a streamlined leadership structure emerged. Going forward, the large group of partners may meet less frequently, and focus more on increasing the capacity for partners — rather than consultants — to implement the campaign strategies. The active campaign partners propose to strategically coordinate communications and technical assistance to target geographic areas, and to more directly engage local governments and other organizations that do not receive support from McKnight.

Change is seldom easy. The decisions on next steps for Embrace Open Space, given the personal connections the partners had developed over several years, were difficult to reach and remain somewhat controversial. As McKnight's role transitioned from communications driver to more of a traditional funder, fractures were perhaps inevitable. Today some partners feel more engaged than ever, but others are less confident of the group's continued strategic effectiveness; a few have suggested they may leave the partnership altogether.

Nonetheless, determinations about ongoing work and next steps continue to be reached collectively by the collaboration's active participants, guided by a goal to preserve the campaign's overarching messages, alliances, and momentum — and with an understanding that the campaign is at its strongest when it is able to adapt to changing contexts and evolving needs.

Although the campaign may evolve into new forms, the grantee-partners' acquired knowledge, experience, and relationships will help ensure that its messages and spirit continue to influence public dialogue and decisions about the Twin Cities' future.

communications FRAMING

Organizations sometimes overlook one simple-sounding basic question as they develop messages for a communications campaign, probably because the answer *seems* so obvious: What is this all about?

Humans learn from one another primarily by listening to stories. We fit new information into stories we already know, and constantly run narratives in our minds to describe and explain our world. Stories bring meaning and perspective by putting supporting facts into relationship with identifiable characters.

Imagine that a Minnesota mosquito is buzzing around your head. The buzzing is annoying and the mosquito is threatening to bite, so you swat and luckily connect on the first try — and the mosquito's buzzing is silenced. Pretty happy ending, right? But now imagine this same story from the perspective of the *mosquito*. The facts might be virtually identical, but the frame makes all the difference.

Groups working to create social change can increase the power and clarity of their communications if they start by exposing and examining the assumptions in the stories their communications normally tell. Once aware and intentional in their storytelling around issues, groups are able to build the frame — or story — that is most universally compelling. >

Advocates often base communications on *stating a problem*:

“Urban sprawl is out of control,”

and then *offering a solution*:

“We must protect open space before sprawl destroys it.”

In this example, the success of the story depends on the dangerous assumption that the audience’s opinions will match those of the advocates — that “Urban sprawl is out of control.” But to engage people around a social issue, it’s important to begin communications with what *citizens* — not advocates — already care about. This means starting with shared values, and applying those values to a context already familiar to the desired audience.

A communications frame is a tool, based in cognitive science, for organizing a story. It has a specific order and structure:

1. Evoke the values the audience holds in common.
2. Establish the context to which the values should be applied.
3. Define the issue.

The process of working together to develop a shared frame can be difficult and frustrating because it involves questioning each other’s, as well as one’s own, deeply held assumptions. It requires looking at the issue in unfamiliar ways. When this process

is done well, however, it produces a simple, clear, inclusive story that sets the terms for discussion that support the proposed change. The resulting story sometimes appears so obvious that groups say: “Why didn’t we just start with that?” Unfortunately, arriving at the “obvious” is often a struggle.

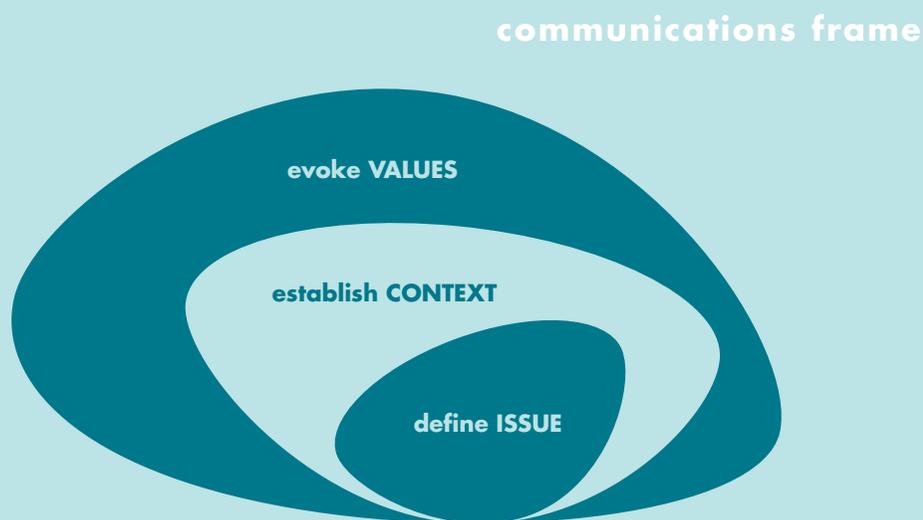
defining “open space”

For the Embrace Open Space campaign partners, the first obvious question was “What exactly is open space?” To help us answer that question, we hired the University of Minnesota’s Metropolitan Design Center to research and report on the ways open space was being defined. The center provided a typology of open spaces, examples of each type in the metro region, and a general status report about open space protection efforts in the metro counties.

This research established enough shared ground for a series of meetings to rethink the definition of open space and to frame the broad story. That story started to take shape when everyone could agree that open space served fundamental *human* needs. This reintroduction of human beings into the open space issue marked a breakthrough for the environmental professionals in the group. Until then, the work many grantees were doing was based on sound ecological principles that “environmentalists” could embrace, but to which other citizens often had difficulty relating.

The link between people and land is an important element of the frame. It extends the appeal of open space protection to a greater range of people. “If the open space movement is going to succeed,” said Al Singer of the Dakota County Farmland and Natural Areas Program, “we have to integrate the social aspects of open space — like health and recreation — into our arguments for protection.”

During these framing meetings, participants were challenged to think about open space preservation from the broadest possible perspective, in terms of the average person’s self-interest. This led them to further define open spaces as vital community *assets* that provide shared benefits. Whether the land was a privately owned farm or woodlot, or a public tract, regardless if a given listener ever saw or used a specific piece of land, collectively these properties were shared assets to the people of the region.



Ultimately, the partners recognized that they were telling a story about how shared human needs are related to an *asset providing broad community benefit*. They were then able to define the issue in a mobilizing way, as *public choices* that were being made every day throughout the region to protect or not protect existing open spaces.

The group's reimagined frame for open space looked like this:

1. We all share fundamental human needs.
2. Open space is a vital but threatened asset to fulfillment of those needs.
3. Public choices are made daily that affect the protection of open space.

This simple narrative incorporates framing ideas that the group developed to help shape its eventual communications strategy:

human needs, threatened assets, public choices

Everybody needs the outdoors — not as a treat for a long weekend, but as a part of daily life. Whether our windows look out to a farmyard or a city street, our psychological, physical, and economic well-being depends on the health of our surroundings. And our lives ultimately depend on the natural systems that enable all life.

In Minnesota, we have wonderful, immensely valuable natural assets. But Minnesota is growing and changing. In just the past generation, even in the past five years, we've lost many special places — and increased pressure on others — that may never be recovered. We know this heritage is too precious to waste. To protect the gifts we have, for ourselves and for our grandchildren, we must recognize their true value and their connections to our lives.

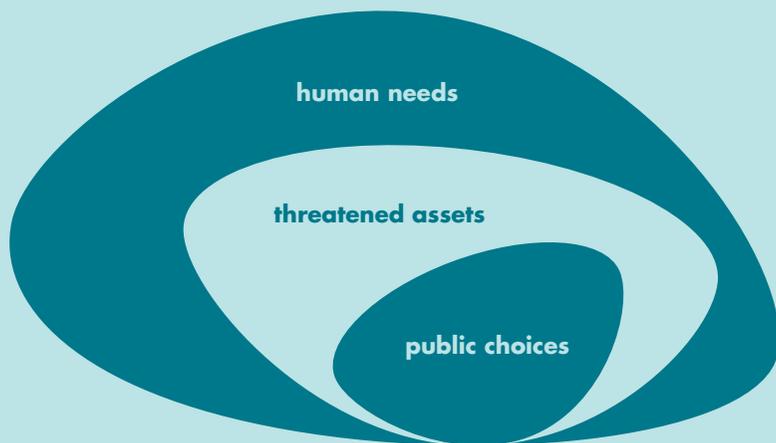
Humans always change their landscape. Together we have the right and the responsibility to shape our communities. Public choices are being made every day. Local governments make some of these choices, and private citizens make some. But all the choices that are made, about what to build and what to keep, must be choices we all can live with — tomorrow and in future generations.

This story of *human needs, threatened assets, and public choices* was the starting point for all the messages from the campaign itself and from the individual partners. Every communication, whatever the medium — a small group meeting, an editorial, a series of advertisements, a listserv message, an interview with a reporter, a speech — had to be seen as an opportunity to set the terms of discussion by advancing the frame. Partners disciplined themselves to refer constantly to the basic open space story and remind themselves of the values, context, and definition of the issue they needed to convey in every communication.

redefining “open space”

Once a shared frame has been developed, it shouldn't be viewed as a static document. To be effective, it has to be flexible enough to be consistent with the needs of different messengers addressing different audiences. As the frame begins to influence public

communications frame: open space



discourse, it has to evolve as public discussion evolves. Further, communications have to be opportunistic, in the sense of making use of new events or the emergence of new messengers or allies.

For these reasons, the use of the frame must be evaluated as an ongoing part of any campaign. For the Embrace Open Space campaign, the evaluation included tracking media and analyzing how others — including reporters, developers, and elected officials — were discussing these issues in public.

At the launch of the campaign in 2002, the Minneapolis *Star Tribune* editorialized that the EOS campaign put open space “in a new and provocative frame, where specific landscapes illuminate the issues.” The newspaper went on to say that the initiative exemplified “all the purposes a coherent open-space strategy might honor: saving remnant forest and fen; providing green corridors for wildlife and recreation; reclaiming abandoned industrial tracts; enhancing water quality — and, yes, guiding future development.”

A week later, the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* ran a major editorial on an upcoming (and later approved) voter referendum for the acquisition and protection of open space, under the headline “Preserving Precious Open Spaces.” The editorial included the phrase “embracing land preservation” and emphasized the public engagement and the public

Communications have to be opportunistic about new events, messengers, and allies. The use of the frame must be evaluated as an ongoing part of any campaign.

choice that the EOS campaign had set out to define as the fundamental terms by which open space protections should be understood.

Year-end media analyses were completed in years two and three. The studies clearly showed that the campaign had increased the amount of coverage of open space issues and that there had been significant traction for key elements of the frame, particularly the emphasis on public decisions and choices, and on referring to open space as a regional asset. The least resonant part of the frame was the idea of human needs. This “asset” was often characterized in terms of the peace, tranquility, and spiritual refreshment that natural places provide, but not explicitly as a basic human need. Instead, the media coverage tended to point to the individual preferences of the speaker. This set up a story of competing preferences, one person’s against another’s, or against the needs of the community.

The analysis also showed that the value of open space was still more likely to be framed by media reports in terms of protecting species and nature than in terms of human need. Reporters immediately recognize “save the critters” when they hear it, and — unfortunately from the standpoint of advancing the more useful frame — they continue to hear “save the critters” from naturalists as well as citizen activists and policy advocates more often than they hear about human needs.

Consequently, the campaign partners increased their efforts to put people prominently in the story. They also revisited, and revised, the frame at the end of the third year. In a daylong discussion, they analyzed the original frame, reviewed their own communications and changes that had taken place in the policy environment, and determined the following:

1. Human needs were best represented by *values* associated with health and prosperity, responsibility, conservation, and legacy.
2. The *context* of “threatened assets” had served its purpose in increasing attention to open space but seemed too negative in the current political climate. The context was revised to be more positive: improving the community, and keeping what we have and need as communities grow and change. Framed this way, open space is an asset that

helps define a place, and provides amenities and resources that can increase prosperity.

3. The *issue*, still, is getting people involved in the decision-making process, giving them something they can easily do to make a difference, helping them take control and participate in how their community develops and progresses.

The revised communications frame incorporated these ideas:

1. We value health, prosperity, responsibility, and conservation of natural resources.
2. To honor these values, we must improve and maintain the vitality of our communities.
3. Each citizen can help maintain a vital community by getting involved in the decision-making process.

In the new frame, the values of health, prosperity, responsibility, and conservation replaced the more general “human needs”; the campaign’s context shifted from “threatened assets” to the more specific “community vitality”; and generic “public choices” gave way to identifiable “land use choices.”

The revised frame will inform the communications work of the campaign partners over the next year or two, and will be revisited and revised as necessary to keep the broad strategy moving forward.

communications frame: open space revised



creative STRATEGY AND TACTICS

Strategy in communications starts with one goal: define *what* is supposed to happen as the result of the communication.

Defining the end-goals is sometimes difficult. People often shortchange the targeting of outcomes and move on quickly to selecting tactics. With Embrace Open Space, however, nearly a year of research, frame-setting, and strategy clarification passed before the partners started brainstorming tactics. Their early, concentrated work to define end-goals made all the subsequent work easier, more efficient, and fun.

After crucial end-goals have been defined, options for *how* to achieve them start to crystallize. The means to the end are tactics built to respond to questions like these: Who can make it happen? What story do they need to hear? Whom do they need to hear it from? Which media can deliver the story most effectively? The best responses will take into account many variables, and practical implementation may depend to some extent on available opportunities.

The EOS campaign aspired to support the unified efforts of those working for open space protection and to change the public terms of discussion as reflected in news coverage and in the deliberations of elected decision makers.

The campaign sought not only to change the terms of public discussion but also to raise public interest in the issue. This would create an opinion climate in the region that >

butterfly launch

On a cloudy September morning, 200 monarch butterflies lay nearly dormant in paper envelopes, soon to embark on their southern migration. Their release, from the warming hands of children in locations throughout the Twin Cities, would signal the start of the Embrace Open Space campaign.

In St. Paul, about 60 people gathered overlooking the Phalen Creek Valley, a long-neglected former railway yard along the Mississippi River that open space advocates hoped to transform into a public nature sanctuary.

St. Paul's mayor praised the farsighted land protection efforts promoted by the campaign and talked about the important role of open space in the city's vitality. A partner group of the campaign, state legislators, and The McKnight Foundation's president emphasized the need for citizen involvement in public decisions about land use. Their remarks were brief, but strengthened by a few carefully honed and coordinated messages.

After a break for pumpkin muffins, apples, hot cider, and coffee, the officials joined the children for a ceremonial butterfly release. The children were awed and delighted, and local newspapers captured attention-getting and memorable images.

An hour and a half later and a few miles away, the scene was repeated — this time atop a wild and endangered river bluff. The stirring messages were much the same, but were now delivered by a new, localized cast of officials and partner organizations. Over the course of the day, four such events were held, including one along an urban creek in Minneapolis and another in a nature preserve in the northern suburbs.

would bolster the individual efforts of grantees and others working on behalf of land protection, and that would awaken decision makers to the importance of this issue to their constituencies.

This strategy — and fierce attention to getting the biggest bang for every buck — propelled tactical decisions throughout the campaign, from the staging of a multi-event launch to the involvement of “unusual suspects” in media engagements to support the campaign.

Like any other long-term campaign, Embrace Open Space evolved from a discrete set of tactics into something richer and more complex. As the campaign gained headway and new opportunities arose — especially in the form of new land protection efforts — layers were regularly examined and adjusted. Successful elements were kept; clunkers were discarded or replaced. The partners and our consultants constantly sought new ways to reach the widest cross section of media and citizen interest.

key audiences are powerful allies

Early on, the partners decided on target audiences for the campaign. Elected officials, decision makers, and media were considered key. But other segments of the local population were also important: suburban voters, especially suburban females, demographically identified as potentially powerful allies; natural partners such as other environmental groups; and a diverse group known as unusual suspects. To Embrace Open Space, unusual suspects comprise citizens and organizations whose stake in open space preservation might be demonstrable, if not immediately obvious to themselves or others. This group included farmers, hunters and anglers, parents, medical workers, religious groups, and real estate developers.

The campaign's launch illustrates how the campaign tactics grew almost organically out of decisions around the final goals and the target audiences. As the partners planned for a big, attention-getting launch, they questioned whose attention was most needed at the campaign's kickoff. The partners chose to pursue natural allies and the media, as well as the decision makers, who were among the campaign's most important targets. Advance direct mail surfaced as the cheapest and most compelling channel to tee up

the campaign for these groups.

It was fairly easy to get news of the launch to the selected groups. The partners compiled a list of 150 conservation, parks, and environmental organizations that would likely support and benefit the campaign, and sent each group three separate mailings. The first alerted them to the planned campaign and provided some general background about the issue. The second mailing provided an update and offered template articles and photos the recipients could use in their own newsletters and websites, encouraging them to spread the word. Finally, the third mailing officially invited the group to the launch.

At the same time, just before the November 2002 election, another trio of letters was directed toward candidates, elected officials, and agency heads. For this group, the first letter contained information about the open space campaign, the second invited them to the launch, and the third highlighted what Minnesota citizens and the media had recently said and done about open space issues.

To engage the media, the partners staged a multi-event campaign kickoff. Four serial events in different parts of the metro area took place within a six-hour window, with the compelling visual draw of a monarch butterfly release. Butterflies taking wing suggested

a pursuit of natural freedoms, hinting at some appealing values of open space preservation. And the overt involvement of children further drove home a message about the legacy of open space for future generations.

which stories must be told?

The partners believed the campaign had to be grounded in stories about human experience — not in environmental theory.

Convinced that citizen interest would be heightened by real-life local endangered places, the partners identified and researched a list of 10 at-risk open spaces in the Twin Cities, and called them the “10 Twin Cities Treasures.” Each site faced an impending decision about its future. The Treasures were placed on a map of the Twin Cities metro area, encouraging people all over the metro to locate the Treasure in their own home area, making the spot instantly relevant as their own open space.

Strategically, the 10 Treasures tell the story of open space as part of everyone’s personal experience. There are many special places in the Twin Cities, and public decisions are being made every day about what land we keep and what land we lose. With that story in mind, the partners in the campaign were careful to choose a good geographical array of sites. The chosen Treasures were not necessarily the region’s most endangered, most significant, or most important areas for protection; they were instead broadly representative of endangered open spaces throughout the region. Two years after the first 10 debuted, the campaign announced five additional Treasures, carefully chosen to capture the imagination and attention of a broader audience.

Identified during kickoff events and featured in the campaign’s Citizen Action Kit, the Treasures quickly became the campaign touchstone. They ensured local media attention and combined well to create a more complex story of regional interest. Regular Treasure updates were provided on the campaign website, with special attention to upcoming decisions, and announcements were posted whenever public action resulted in protection. Over the course of the campaign, the Treasures functioned beautifully to familiarize thousands of Twin Citians, including decision makers, with these special sites and the issues faced by them — and, by extension, the issues faced by other sites *like* them.

Other than the 10 Treasures Map, the **Citizen Action Kit** was the campaign’s only major print publication. Only a small quantity of these were printed, for distribution at launch events and via the partners, but the entire kit is available free to download from the campaign’s website. The printed kit consisted of five brochures in one envelope:

Getting started. Background on open space in the Twin Cities area and contact information for partners

Talk value. Key messages, as well as practical tips for talking about the issue to friends, colleagues, and neighbors

Take a stand. Information about communicating with policymakers

Pick up a pen. Advice about writing letters and editorials, complete with starter-samples

Use your imagination. 20 straightforward things anyone can do to get involved

“Coverage of the Treasures made our work and the work of a lot of other organizations trying to save the sites much easier,” said Kevin Bigalke, director of conservation programs at Friends of the Minnesota Valley. “It changed the level of public and policymaker understanding of these sites.”

Several of the treasures are now on their way to being successfully protected and restored. In the eastern metro area, Lower Phalen Creek, a 27-acre industrial site near downtown on St. Paul’s east side, was acquired and is being developed into one of the city’s newest parks and the Bruce Vento Nature Sanctuary. In the southeastern metro area, thanks to the work of a group of Eagan residents called the Friends of Eagan Core Greenway, the City of Eagan matched a Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) grant to study the greenway proposal — potentially saving an endangered, unbroken corridor of land that stretches for more than 400 acres. Eagan, the Trust for Public Land, Dakota County Farmland and Natural Areas Program, DNR Metro Greenways, DNR Local Initiative Grants, and DNR Remediation Grants later collaborated to protect three properties, with partial funding from the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund as recommended by the Legislative Commission on Minnesota Resources.

Detailed information about the Treasures and those working to protect them was featured

prominently on the campaign website, www.EmbraceOpenSpace.org. The workhorse of the campaign, the website provided an accessible path for citizens to become involved. Advertising and other campaign tactics were designed to drive curious people to the website. By year three, visitors also had the option to sign up for monthly campaign e-newsletters to receive updates and alerts.

sometimes the messengers are the message

The messengers of a story can be nearly as meaningful as the story itself. For that reason, the campaign partners and the consultants paid a great deal of attention to their message-carriers. To promote the concept of open space as a universal story, they pushed for people from all walks of life to help tell the story, rather than simply relying on partners and Foundation staff.

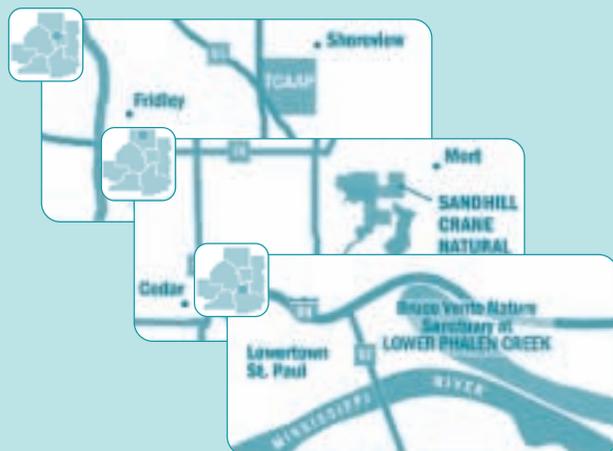
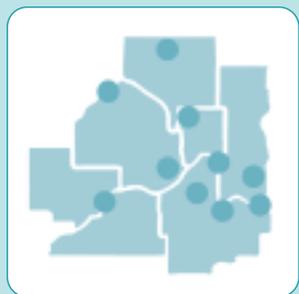
Ordinary people often make extraordinary efforts to protect things in which they believe deeply. People with profound interest in an issue are natural messengers, especially if they can speak from their own experience with passion and conviction. To mobilize them and provide a venue to put their stories in front of others, including the media, the campaign developed its Champions of Open Space awards. The awards program was designed to uncover and publicize the power of individual citizens to make a difference in the struggle to protect Twin Cities endangered spaces.

The awards recipients were thoughtfully selected. The first round of awards went to citizen activists and county commissioners who, in a year of strident “no tax increase” politics, had impressively spearheaded a successful \$20 million open space protection voter referendum.

“This campaign had a direct effect on the positive outcome of the Dakota County referendum,” emphasized Dakota County’s Al Singer. “What the campaign said, and how it said it, yielded very real dividends there. And the recognition as Champions of Open Space cemented their commitment to the follow-up work, which has been invaluable.”

Over the next two years, additional awards recognized the contributions of landowners, developers, citizen activist groups, conservation groups, and nature centers from around the region. The champions were announced in public ceremonies that attracted

twin cities treasures maps



local community members and leaders, in addition to friends, colleagues, and families of the recipients. Each ceremony received media coverage, not only in smaller local papers, but also in the business section of several regional dailies.

To capture the attention of citizens who might not necessarily consider themselves “open space champions,” the campaign placed a series of unusual suspect opinion pieces in regional newspapers. The partners first identified a number of people who were working in diverse fields with tangential interests in open space protection and who were willing to promote the issue publicly — with optional assistance from a hired public affairs agency. The unique and powerful results were placed in specialty publications, and broadened the voice behind open space issues:

- An op-ed from an older and well-respected *farmer* appeared in all three of Minnesota’s major agricultural magazines.
- A *public health official* wrote about the relationship between health and open space.
- A local *hunting and fishing TV show host* wrote a piece that several outdoors newspapers and magazines ran.
- Two *parents* explored the values of open space protection for families in a high-circulation newsprint magazine on parenting.

Although the campaign used many tactics to deliver its story, mass media over time played a major role in reaching decision makers and other key audiences.

- A *city council member* and one of the campaign partners co-signed, for a local weekly business journal, an op-ed about important lessons learned through community development.
- The *minister* of a large congregation wrote about the need for religious communities to become actively involved in the protection of open space.

delivery vehicles, loaded for bear

Although the campaign used many tactics to deliver its story, mass media over time played a major role in reaching decision makers and other key audiences.

The partners understood that the campaign, to be successful, needed to change the level and nature of media coverage around open space issues, not simply create coverage. Tactics abound to garner media attention, but the partners and our consultants focused on those that would leverage coverage in the form of a specific open space message: It meets a vital human need. It is an asset that could be lost. And public decisions are being made today and every day about what happens to it.

An enormous amount of media relations work led up to the campaign launch — op-ed submissions, editorial board meetings, and personalized pitches to local papers, as well as pitches to major print and electronic outlets. *Human need, threatened assets, and public choices*. The same message, in thoughtfully told stories, was repeated and reinforced across media throughout the region.

Because of their important role as spokespersons, the campaign partners also trained for media interviews before the launch, and devised talking points to ensure message consistency around the core frame. As the partners fielded incoming media calls, their voices and individual perspectives brought variety and credibility to the campaign.

After the 2002 launch, the continuing media activity focused on creative new ways to restate the running story, through the Champions awards, updates on the original “10 Treasures,” identification of new Treasures, and various news opinion pieces, as well as a timely television production.

In addition to the media coverage *earned* through campaign activities, *paid* media and

advertising were important for their controlled precision in presenting clear messages and images to target audiences. At the campaign's beginning, print advertising was used to raise visibility and set a public tone for the open space story — and was always designed to drive people to the Embrace Open Space website.

Clever, motivated designers helped produce striking print ads on a small budget. The newspaper ads featured four short lines of delicate type, remarkable only because they floated in isolation on an otherwise blank half page of newspaper: "If a little open space has this much impact here, imagine what an impact it can have in our communities. Don't let our parks, woods, wetlands, and farmland disappear. You can make the difference. www.EmbraceOpenSpace.org." Amid the cacophony of advertising and editorial content on the surrounding pages, the understated ads grabbed reader attention and created an immediate buzz.

The second-year advertising used inexpensive radio and local community newspaper placements. The radio spots featured adults reminiscing about their favorite outdoor sites from childhood. But wherever listeners might anticipate the name of a park, lake, or woods, a harsh mechanical voice instead barked "parking lot," "four-lane highway," or "industrial park" — indicating development that had occurred on the sites of the speakers' childhood memories. The spot closed with this counsel: "Leave children places

to remember. Go to www.EmbraceOpenSpace.org and find out how your voice really can make a difference right now."

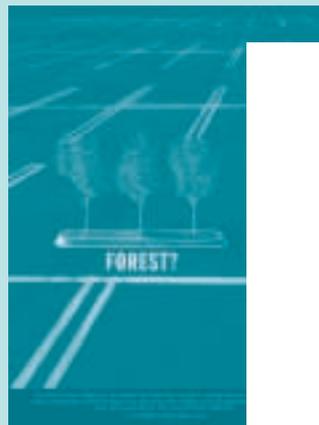
In total, the two short advertising flights generated approximately 13 million impressions, which tracked generally with usage spikes on the campaign's website.

To reach wider audiences, the Embrace Open Space partners kept their eyes open for opportunities beyond standard paid advertising. As the campaign took off, luck would have it that Twin Cities Public Television (TPT) was also establishing a new programming effort called Minnesota Channel. Although Minnesota Channel offers an audience reach and production quality that clearly surpass that of cable access, it remains devoted to lower-cost productions for nonprofit organizations, around issues and events of interest to the whole region.

The development of the Embrace Open Space television production, *The Last 6%* (a reference to remaining native landscape in the Twin Cities region), was coordinated by a public affairs firm but relied heavily on input from a committee of campaign partners; the full partnership provided script evaluations and critique. The project took about eight months to complete.

Minnesota Channel was a good medium for the civic engagement campaign. The partners realized that they would reach a smaller audience than would be possible via standard broadcast TV. Nonetheless, at relatively low cost, *The Last 6%* had the potential for indefinite rebroadcast, redistribution to local cable channels, and non-broadcast distribution. The show was heavily promoted through the EOS website, the campaign newsletter, and partner groups, in addition to Minnesota Channel's own advertising. The half-hour show reached a fairly broad spectrum of viewers. By design, the first five minutes of content was written to be suitable for excerpt by the campaign's speakers bureau. Although TPT provided a cost-effective opportunity for EOS, cable access television may afford similar resources in other markets.

message vehicles



If a little open space has this much impact here, imagine what an impact it can have in our communities. Don't let our parks, woods, wetlands, and farmland disappear. You can make the difference.
www.EmbraceOpenSpace.org

hallmarks of SUCCESS

CONCLUSION

It's important to build different kinds of evaluation into any campaign. Simple monitoring of website hits, media impressions, e-newsletter sign-ups, and attendance at events is ongoing. The Embrace Open Space campaign also contracted with online advocacy experts to evaluate the campaign's website at the end of year two; the evaluation resulted in a significant navigation overhaul. And the EOS partners completed their own assessments of the campaign, and of their participation in it.

But a true evaluation of project success inevitably includes determining whether important goals were reached.

The Embrace Open Space campaign aimed to change the terms of discussion about open space, and to strengthen the capacity of the partner organizations to protect open space. Certainly there was significant movement toward the first objective; in fact, some campaign partners have noted an "echo effect": an awareness of EOS-defined values and issue-framing reverberating, as direct echoes of the campaign's activity, in news media and in the dialogue of decision makers and other issue stakeholders.

The Embrace Open Space collaborative campaign influenced how news outlets define and present the issue. The quality and the frequency of issue coverage have increased and potentially helped shift public perception by more often presenting the issue as "public decisions to protect shared assets." The availability of the Embrace Open >

Space website and other campaign resources may have helped reporters — especially those covering outdoor recreation — to understand and to report on open space as an issue of great importance to their audiences.

The campaign team never aimed to directly influence any specific public policy decisions, and in fact took great care to avoid doing so. Nevertheless, the advocacy work of individual policy-oriented partner organizations aligned well with campaign activities — and the partners witnessed firsthand how the campaign’s content seeped into pivotal discussions among mayors, city councils, and citizens throughout the Twin Cities region.

Regardless of its determination to focus on public communications and citizen engagement, “EOS definitely has a brand identity on the *policy* level,” said Jim Erkel, an attorney and the land use and transportation director at the Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy. “When we walk into a room for a conversation about open space protection, we can assume some of that brand authority, and just as importantly, we can assume that others in the room will recognize it. That’s been very important in some of our negotiations.”

Finally, the ability of the partner organizations to achieve individual strategic goals was strengthened. Several of the 10 Treasures spotlighted by the campaign have become the focus of public discussion and action. Areas that five years ago were considered in danger of immediate and poorly controlled loss are now the focus of conscious decisions. Other areas without hope a few years ago are now protected. The growing public awareness has reduced all threats to some extent, because of a new understanding of citizen involvement in choices about what is kept and what is lost.

Scott Elkins of the Sierra Club North Star Chapter remembered his experience before the EOS campaign in suburban Washington County: “Several years ago it was difficult to find even a few organizations to work with. Today, there’s been a change that represents at least a couple of orders of magnitude — the capacity to organize, the appetite for land protection, just the potential out there. I know it’s not all EOS, but it’s no longer such a struggle to find groups and individuals to work on protection projects. That’s very important. And it’s changed a lot even over the past three years.”

“The campaign forced all of us to remember why open space is so important in the first place,” said Jane Prohaska, executive director of the Minnesota Land Trust. “It brought us back to the fundamental relationship between people and nature, and showed us how to develop messages that move a wide variety of people to care about what happens to the land.”

When committed organizations collaborate as partners to tell inclusive stories, their realm of influence is collectively broadened and strengthened. As evidenced by the Twin Cities Embrace Open Space collaboration, many voices and even competing perspectives can invaluablely enrich the understanding and the discussion around public issues. Foundations and grantees, community coalitions, government and citizen groups, and others can be formidable allies in helping to set their regions’ agendas through communications.

As the old adage says, “There is power in numbers.” Multiple voices in a unified front add strength to any communication. Effective collaborators use shared goals and resources to identify important issues as concerns for the broadest audience. Working together, a team of partners can usually push strategies far beyond the reach of one organization. Before social change can begin, however, all parties need to agree on where to start and what to do. Compromise fuels the collaboration, and the resulting alliance is stronger because it’s supported on all sides and shaped by the group.

It doesn’t happen overnight. Building unity requires the commitment and the desire of all collaborators to meet eye to eye and thoughtfully chart a shared course. Sometimes the first step is simply creating common ground.

acknowledgments

This case study was researched and initially prepared by Dick Brooks and Michael Goldberg of **ActionMedia**. ActionMedia served as framing consultant for the Embrace Open Space Campaign, and provides training, research, and consultation services on issue framing and strategic communication to people working for positive social change. More information is available at www.actionmedia.org.

Founded in 1953 and endowed by William L. McKnight and Maude L. McKnight, **The McKnight Foundation** has assets of approximately \$2 billion and granted about \$90 million in 2005. Although Mr. McKnight was an early leader of the 3M Company, the Foundation is independent of 3M. The Foundation's grantmaking priorities include support for children and families, the region and its communities, the arts, the environment, and scientific research in selected fields. The Foundation's primary geographic focus is the state of Minnesota. More information is available at www.mcknight.org.

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