

Community Heart & Soul®

— Guided by what matters most —

CORTEZ, COLORADO

Engaging missing voices in local government was one goal of the Cortez Community Heart & Soul project. The team used Community Heart & Soul's Community Network Analysis tool to take a deep look into who lives in the community, and invested time in building trust, changing the way that Cortez does business.

POPULATION:
9,000

CHALLENGE:
Reaching missing voices, bridging divides

FOCUS:
Comprehensive plan and land use code updates

KEY TOOL:
Community Network Analysis

Groups that had not been involved in local government including the Ute Mountain Ute tribe, the Hispanic community, and youth were all much better represented after guidance from Community Heart & Soul. More engagement from residents helped planners make decisions and better advocate for positive change based on what most to the residents.

Diversity is part of Cortez's unique character. Government leaders wanted to capitalize on that strength by making sure all voices were heard in planning for the future.

Cortez "by the numbers":

- 30% of the population is Native American and Hispanic compared to 23% for the state
- 55 community-wide events were held
- 1,350 residents were engaged

Local conditions:

Cortez was updating its Comprehensive Plan and revising its land-use code—not exactly the stuff that draws crowds to public hearings at city hall on a weeknight. City planners wanted to get residents more involved and excited about planning. Plus, there was increasing concern about divides between all the groups that make Cortez a melting pot including ranchers, youth, recreation enthusiasts, the Ute Mountain Ute and Navajo tribes, and Hispanics.

Volunteer and Community Response:

City officials began to think beyond the city hall public hearing. Using Community Network Analysis, planners went to people in their neighborhoods and sponsored block parties and pot-luck dinners. And they went back to residents to check their work. All of this helped people to connect and to see each other as fellow neighbors.

Heart & Soul Outcomes:

Community Heart & Soul built bridges and changed the way Cortez does business.

- Community Heart & Soul sponsored a block party in a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood on September 16, Mexican Independence Day. The event was organized by the local residents who served their food, invited the school principal and teachers, a Spanish-to-English interpreter, and the police chief. This led to greater trust, including a better relationship with law enforcement.
- To increase youth participation, full voting seats were granted to youth on the Parks and Recreation, Golf, and Library advisory boards.
- In the skateboard park, students were given a graffiti wall, and graffiti incidents in town dropped dramatically.
- The Ute Mountain Ute tribe contributed to the design of a gateway sign at the entrance to town nearest to their tribal lands. Having the tribe participate in the design, which included culturally relevant symbols, was a way to honor and respect their neighbors.

Community Heart & Soul also changed the way local government did business with developers and the state by:

- Encouraging developers to meet, discuss, and resolve differences with neighbors well in advance of public hearings.
- Creating a plan for the city's main street that was accepted by the state, setting a precedent for collaboration between the city and state transportation agency. Previously, the state treated the road like a major highway, not as a gateway to the town.

“Heart & Soul can really be called long-term planning the right way.”

Kirsten Sackett, former director of building and planning, Cortez

