



2023 TOP 100 GOOD PRACTICE STORY

Title:

Listening to Locals: Adapting CISR Methodology to Engage Residents of La Plata County

Destination, Country: La Plata County (Durango, Colorado – United States)

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In the category: Destination Management Environment & Climate Thriving Communities
 Nature & Scenery Culture & Tradition Business & Marketing

The Story in a picture:

Visit Durango Staff tabling at the community clean commute week event.



Summary:

Visit Durango needed to figure out how to improve the quality of life for residents of La Plata County while responsibly maintaining its competitiveness as a Colorado Destination. We conducted a community engagement project, “Listening to Locals,” in 2022 to initiate a dialog with residents by using parts of the Continual Improvement for Social Responsibility Model. Through fourteen two-hour and five one-hour workshops, we interacted with over 50 organizations from for-profit and non-profit sectors, as well as over 25 residents across La Plata County, to identify more than 30 economic strengths, 30 environmental strengths, and 50 social strengths in addition to 30 financial risks, 30 environmental risks, and 50 social risks, while also highlighting 60 economic opportunities and 50 environmental and social opportunities.



Good Practice Story:

Destination description

Brief background of the destination.

La Plata County, home of Durango, Colorado, in the United States, has 20,000 residents, with 44,100 residents in the greater county. Durango was founded in 1881 by the Durango and Rio Grande Railroad. Durango has a historic downtown full of places to shop and eat. The San Juan Mountains provide world-class access to many outdoor activities. South of Durango, we remain very rural with large tracks of farmland. Due to the wide range of amenities and biomes, we have an equal number of residents with different beliefs, backgrounds, and ethnicities who make up the population. Visit Durango Represents all La Plata County businesses in the tourism and hospitality realm. La Plata County is also significant from a land area metric, covering 1,700 square miles (4,400 km²).

Issues faced

Problems/issues solved with the Good Practice Story.

La Plata County is an incredible place; however, like any community, some issues need to be addressed. At Visit Durango, we're committed to making sure that we are doing our part to make this area the best it can be.

Through our community engagement project, we discovered various issues facing our county, from environmental concerns to economic and social challenges. We knew we needed a holistic approach to these issues, so we looked at all the triple bottom line areas – people, planet, and profit.

One of the most significant issues we wanted to solve was aligning Visit Durango and local businesses with community members' wants and needs. That's why we launched our Listening to Locals campaign. We wanted to hear directly from residents about what they see as our strengths, where the risks lie, and what underutilized assets (opportunities) exist that we could strengthen to improve the quality of life for everyone who lives here.

Through this campaign, we identified some great strengths we have as a community in order to protect and monitor them. We are proud of what makes us unique in Colorado and want to ensure we are safeguarding those qualities identified. We also discovered some opportunities we had not considered before, and we are excited to explore how we can leverage them to set La Plata County apart from other Colorado tourism destinations.

One of the other issues we tackled was planning for community engagement with the Destination Master Management Plan (DMMP). We knew it was critical to get as much input from our community as possible to ensure that the plan reflects the needs and desires of the residents. With such a large landmass and a diverse population, our work is cut out for us. We recognized that some demographics, particularly older residents, may not have easy access to information about community events through more modern channels and rely on more traditional forms of communication such as television or radio. We also know that the Latinx population, who speak English as a second language, needed to be included in the conversation. We worked to find new ways to engage those groups. In addition, we wanted to ensure that no one was left out of the process simply because of where they lived or where they were single parents. Our county is vast; some areas are over an hour from Durango, where the DMMP meetings were held. We didn't want distance or childcare to be a barrier to participation.

Methods, steps, and tools applied

Solutions implemented to address the sustainability problems or issues.

Visit Durango Started by developing a process and interactive presentation by adapting the Continual Improvement for Social Responsibility methodology to gather feedback. Starting with stakeholder identification and creating categories to reach over 100 stakeholders. We held three rounds of workshops. The first round consisted of twelve workshops targeting organizations and businesses of specific sector stakeholder groups. These categories are:

- Chambers of Commerce / Industry Associations
- Financial Institutions
- Agriculture Sector
- Visit Durango Committees and Working Groups.
- Environmental Groups
- Governments
- Education (schools)
- Residents
- Community Organizations for historically underrepresented populations
- Social Advocacy Groups
- Community Leaders and Influencers
- Business Incubators.

The second round was a workshop for the County, municipal, and Tribal governments located within the country. These first two round rounds consisted of two-hour stakeholder consultations from May to November 2022, asking participants to give feedback on social, economic, and environmental conditions in La Plata County and voting on submitted strengths, risks, and opportunities. Visit Durango can use these as a roadmap moving forward. The process didn't end there. We also held five one-hour workshops during the third round open to any resident. These workshops were held after regular working hours and at various community gathering spots throughout the county to meet residents where they lived instead of making them come to us. Spanish and ASL interpreters and childcare professionals were present at every in-person meeting to encourage participation from all underrepresented groups and residents from different geographical areas. Visit Durango's efforts ensured improved polling and representation from the county's residents, ensuring every voice was heard.

After gathering the data, we used two mathematical models to determine the top scores among categories. We wanted to ensure our community was safe and happy, so we asked residents about the most significant risks in La Plata County. We used a specialized process to analyze the data called the Social Responsibility Failure Mode & Effects Analysis (SRFMEA) from the Continual Improvement for Social Responsibility (CISR) methodology. This process helped us determine the issues which are causing the most stress. Residents could vote on their top concerns and then rank them in terms of severity and likelihood of occurrence. We used a scale of 3 to 9 to rate each item and then averaged the scores in each category. Once all the workshops were complete, we combined any duplicate items and used a compound Risk Priority Number (RPN) to develop the top risk scores. It was essential for us to take these steps so we could focus on the most critical issues facing La Plata County.

After gathering everyone's thoughts, we created a Stakeholder Map to help us understand whom to work with and where to improve relationships. This is useful for future projects and initiatives and for the Board of Directors to know how we fit into the community.

Our Goal was to gather feedback from residents and stakeholders about what they want to see in La Plata County’s future. Now that we have the input, we have shared it with everyone. We shared out a report publically on our resident engagement platform, engage.durango.org. We presented our findings to the La Plata County officials and the City of Durango. We also offered to present to the town of Ignacio and Bayfield and hope they will consider this input when planning for their municipality's future. We are particularly excited to see how this feedback will be used in the City of Durango’s DMMP, currently underway by our consultant, JLL. We believe that working together can create an even better vision for La Plata County’s future. At Visit Durango, we are passionate about ensuring that our organization is aligned with the needs and desires of the community. That’s why we are using the outcomes of this project to help us formulate our next Strategic Plan, which is currently underway. We are looking at our strengths, risks, and opportunities to determine what areas to focus on next. We want to ensure that we play a role in making our destination an even better place to live and visit.

Key success factors

Critical elements that led to successfully solving the issues.

We took the time to carefully plan and prepare before launching our in-person workshops. We held an internal seminar first to ensure the format was designed to gather as much valuable information as possible while respecting participants’ time. We were not afraid to push back deadlines, within reason, to perfect the workshop process before scheduling any public sessions. We were also committed to asking the right questions. Instead of focusing solely on tourism, we wanted to explore the broader experiences of living in the area. By doing so, we could avoid potential biases and ensure that our plans would integrate seamlessly into the community fabric rather than trying to force the community to fit into our vision.

To make it easy as possible for people to participate. We met there where they were by holding workshops in various locations, closer to residents’ homes; we eliminated barriers like time and transportation and created a more comfortable environment for open dialogue.

Finally, even though our team didn’t have prior experience in community engagement, we embraced the challenge and adapted as we went along. This willingness to learn and grow was a critical factor in the success of our efforts. By taking these steps, Visit Durango demonstrated our commitment to engaging with the community meaningfully. Our approach ensured that we could gather valuable insights and perspectives, allowing us to create a plan that genuinely reflects the needs and desires of the people who call La Plata County home.

Lessons learned

Challenges faced while implementing the Good Practice and their solutions.

We have learned that the journey of community engagement begins with small steps. Our stakeholder identification process started with categories like the environment, asking ourselves who could represent or speak for our mountains – one of our precious intangible assets.

Our approach emphasized inclusivity, striving to involve as many people from diverse backgrounds and areas as possible. We worked to lower any barriers to participation and remained open to adapting our methods when confronted with challenges we had not anticipated. Though our team at Visit Durango had no prior experience in community or resident engagement, we embraced the unknown and refused to let uncertainty hold us back.

We adopted an agile mindset, adjusting our tactics and strategies as needed. Emphasizing honesty, we took negative feedback to heart, using it as an opportunity for growth and improvement.

Another powerful lesson we learned was that people are often more receptive, open, and appreciative than we might initially think. After hosting workshops outside of town, we were touched by the gratitude expressed by attendees who thanked us for reaching out and genuinely listening non-dismissively.

Although we experienced a strong turnout at most of our workshops, there is still room for improvement in attracting more residents. Visit Durango excels at connecting with audiences beyond La Plata County, but we acknowledge the need to refine our strategies for engaging with our local community members more effectively. We are committed to continuous growth and finding innovative ways to reach out to all residents within our county, ensuring that everyone's voices are heard and valued. To this end, we are currently developing a community engagement index.

Achievements and Results

Direct and indirect results of the Good Practice.

Following our community engagement process, we have achieved significant results and insights that will inform Visit Durango's strategic planning for 2023. Among these accomplishments is the publication of a comprehensive 37-page report featuring 19 critical takeaways for our Board of Directors to consider.

Through this journey, our Destination Management and Marketing Organization has forged connections with new organizations and residents, some of whom have even joined the Destination Management Committee led by Visit Durango. This process has also helped educate residents on our initiatives and objectives.

As we examined the stakeholder map, we identified areas for improvement, such as expanding the "collaboration" category to include more stakeholders and ensuring clear communication to address the "confusion area." We also acknowledged the importance of residents in our success and recognized the need to better engage with those who fall into the "resistance" or "confusion" categories.

The workshops yielded valuable insights across economic, environmental, and social outcomes. Key findings included improved internet access, promoting startups and small businesses, preserving wildlife biodiversity, addressing environmental risks like wildfires and overpopulation, and creating more green spaces within the city. Furthermore, we identified opportunities for educational tours, supporting the establishment of Creative Districts in Ignacio and Bayfield, encouraging community involvement, and organizing multicultural events. Challenges such as the cost of living, lack of strong community leaders, and commodification of culture were also highlighted, emphasizing the need for a sensitive and proactive approach to preserving and celebrating our unique heritage.

These achievements and insights underscore our commitment to fostering a thriving, sustainable, and inclusive La Plata County, where residents and visitors can experience and appreciate our region's rich culture and natural beauty.

Tips for other destinations

Your suggestions or recommendations for other destinations facing the same issues or implementing similar solutions

- Eliminate as many barriers to participation as you can.
- Make sure you have a good way to record and collect data.

- Try to reach as many different stakeholders as possible.
- Be persistent in letting groups know why you want their input.
- Take action on the data.
- Be open to criticism and don't try to contradict it when gathering feedback.
- Don't take criticism personally.
- Work with other organizations you have relationships with to help them get others to show up and get involved with feedback.

Recognitions and Additional references

Recognitions and awards the Good Practice received and supporting evidence.

[Project website](#)

[Timeline](#)

[Executive Summary](#)

[Final Report](#)

[Stakeholder Identification](#)

[Stakeholder Web](#)

[Stakeholder Map](#)

[Math Spreadsheets](#)

[Wrap-Up Presentation to Municipalities/ County](#)

[English Flyer](#)

[Spanish Flyer](#)

[Workshop Slideshow with Community Input](#)

[Interview – You're \(Not\) Welcome Here By Economatic, Community engagement](#)