

Lawrence Community Works:

Using the Power of Networks to Restore a City

| By Peter Plastrik and Madeleine Taylor

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Lawrence CommunityWorks: *Using the Power of Networks to Restore A City*

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This case study is a companion to a broader report, “Network Power for Philanthropy and Nonprofits,” also for the Barr Foundation, about the growing use of network strategies by nonprofit organizations, social entrepreneurs, and foundations.

With a thousand people willing to engage, you can run a city.
Bill Traynor

Connecting in Lawrence

The problem that Lawrence, Massachusetts faces is familiar: how to restore a dying industrial city? But the answer—something called Lawrence CommunityWorks—is far from what community and economic developers are accustomed to trying. In quite unconventional ways, it is engaging the community's grassroots and building heavily upon the social connections of individuals throughout the city to develop new leadership, vision, and changes in Lawrence. It has the legal form of a community development corporation, but its operating structure doesn't look much like that of the usual CDC. Instead, it is a large and growing *network* of community residents.

Most important, Lawrence CommunityWorks (LCW) is creating a potential for change that is stirring the excitement of its organizers, the energy of more than 700 members, and the hopes of philanthropic investors around the country. At the same time, LCW also faces challenges—questions that seem new in the practice of urban restoration.

Lawrence, a former textile center, is one of the poorest urban centers in America, with unemployment rates approaching twice the regional, state, and national averages.¹ Home to successive waves of immigrants, Lawrence's current population of 75,000 is majority Latino.

Five years ago, William Traynor, an experienced community development practitioner and Lawrence native, arrived there to try to revive a failing CDC. With a cadre of MIT urban planning graduates and a handful of seasoned organizers, he hoped to engage community residents in efforts to address the city's daunting deficits. This much was clear to them: Lawrence lacked the civic leadership and the community assets, such as public infrastructure and effective schools, which make for healthy cities.² The goal of the reborn CDC, Lawrence Community Works, should be to create a new leadership capacity out of the grassroots that would rally around, implement, and sustain a vision for the city's future. To achieve this, LCW would have to get thousands of residents to talk about and work on local issues, come together to build their leadership skills, and connect locally in ways that would shape and advance a shared vision.

What was not evident at the outset was how LCW could do it. But eventually this too became clear.

Why A Network?

Bill Traynor took over a CDC, but he suspected that the organization—that *any* organization—could not mobilize and connect large numbers of people the way that was needed. Organizations tend to get territorial and wall off people from each other. They become narrowly identified with particular services, or ideas, or leaders—and tend to settle into those patterns for a long time. In Lawrence, for instance, neighborhood associations had become closed groups of property owners. LCW's organizing director,

¹ Lawrence lost nearly half its manufacturing jobs in the 1970s and 1980s and a further 20 percent of its employment base in the recession of the early 1990s.

² Distinctive features of Lawrence's history figure importantly in this diagnosis: in the city's heyday, mill owners and other members of the Lawrence elite did not live in the city itself and left no legacy of civic engagement. In more recent years, municipal politics, based largely on ethnic loyalties, has produced political gridlock.

Alma Couverthie, spent a year and a half working with one of them, says Traynor, “trying to keep it open and overcome the [internal] divisiveness, but it simply wasn’t going to work.” Another concern about organizations was that much of the energy they amass can be spent on maintaining their own formal structures and process—on themselves, in short, rather than on changes out in the community. Organizations like CDCs can be quite inefficient in producing desired outcomes.

The challenge, as Traynor saw it, was to build a constituency that is not based in an organization, “...something that creates a different contract between and among people and between people and us [the organizers] that is not so territorial, not based on position, but based on action, on doing things.” At the outset, then, LCW supported a looser set of affiliations among residents that focused on projects, such as building and maintaining a neighborhood playground or taking back abandoned alleyways. These small, local networks engaged people and produced immediate efficiencies, since energy was being put into getting things done.

Early on, LCW built a track record of successes, organizing on one street in the North Common neighborhood and then producing several affordable housing units on abandoned lots and rehabilitating a nearby playground. Community meetings and other organizing efforts identified residents who were interested in supporting a broader range of projects, leading to more comprehensive revitalization efforts in the North Common. Local interest in neighborhood programs for youth and financial literacy and English classes led to the creation and the expansion of LCW services for families.

By 2002, when Traynor and his staff took stock of LCW’s condition, it had several departments (real estate, services, organizing) and several hundred members, though many of these people did not know each other. All of the burgeoning connectivity led to a new, defining realization. “We really started thinking in *network* terms,” says Kristen Harol, LCW deputy director. “We wanted to make sure that we understood who was in the network and what was going on...to have a clearer sense of direction.” Focus groups with members revealed a range of expectations for the network: people who saw LCW as mainly a source of services, others who valued the opportunity to connect, share information, and support each other, and still others who saw collective action as LCW’s principal goal. At the annual meeting in 2002, these elements became the foundation of LCW³. Building “The Power of the Network”—connecting people across network clusters, across clubs, groups, committees, and community institutions—became an intentional part of LCW practice.

Out of the evolving network, it was thought, would come civic leadership and concrete changes in community conditions. “Network building means that development [of the city] is about building a human relationship community infrastructure that can, in turn, produce a bricks-and-mortar infrastructure,” sums Traynor. In the network, he explains, people will “bump into decision-making points and participate in them.” Leadership for the city will emerge as network leaders reflect on their experiences, deepen their understanding of the city’s history and development, and apply strategies for collective change. But the starting point would be connectivity and engagement. For that, a network was needed.

³ Formally articulated as: LCW is working to build a growing network of Lawrencians who are engaged in 1) building family and community assets, 2) providing each other with mutual support, and 3) engaging in collective action to advance the revitalization of the City.

Some LCW Accomplishments and Current Projects

- A growing constituency of nearly 700 members committed to Lawrence's revitalization; many volunteer in everything from community outreach to youth development.
- Completion of Summer Street Project, an affordable home-ownership and playground development project that has helped to revitalize the North Common neighborhood.
- Creation of Family Asset Building programs—including the design- and technology-centered Young Professionals Initiative for youth, and basic skills, English literacy, financial literacy, and savings programs for adults—that are helping nearly 300 Lawrence families build tangible and intangible assets.
- Groundbreaking of the Our House Center for Design and Technology, a planned community educational and economic development resource center with programs for families.
- Completion of the Reviviendo Family Housing project, a 17-unit scattered-site affordable rental project that is renovating four historic and abandoned houses in the North Common.
- Launching the Reviviendo Gateway Initiative, a diverse group of businesses, institutions, neighborhood residents and other stakeholders driving the revitalization of the City's Gateway area (the historic mill district, downtown, and adjacent residential neighborhoods).
- Convening the Affordable Housing Action Alliance, a coalition of nonprofit housing developers and community groups that advocate for policies and resources for affordable housing in the City.
- Developing the NeighborCircles organizing strategy, which has involved over 50 new residents in LCW projects and other community development efforts over the past year.
- Creating and launching the PODER Leadership Institute, providing training for residents in facilitative leadership and community-building skills.
- Preparing all eight of first group of graduating Young Professionals seniors for college in 2003. Several of these young people were not considering college two or three years ago; others never believed they would get into places like Northeastern University in Boston, Woodbury University in California, or Parsons School of Design in New York, yet they are there now.

Open Architecture

Anyone who lives or works in Lawrence can become a member of Lawrence CommunityWorks. It's easy to get involved and it's okay to stop being involved; people move in and out of LCW all the time. The goal is to get people engaged and making connections through a wide array of activities on the network. "There's something for everybody," says Harol. "What's important is people are talking to each other, talking with people who maybe live right in their neighborhood, but they've never met."

Thus, LCW has created an “open architecture,” a flexible structure that provides numerous opportunities for community residents to engage in civic life and connect with each other.

In the predominantly Latino North Common, for instance, a group of neighbors sits down to a home-cooked meal and talks about the long and sometimes circuitous journeys that brought them to Lawrence. “When I left the Dominican Republic I went to New York City first,” says Ana Luisa Cabral, “then I moved to Boston after my husband found a job there. We came to Lawrence to look for more affordable housing.” Sandra Mouzon also came to Lawrence to find a home she and her husband could afford; she stayed, she says, “because it’s actually a beautiful city. There’s the Historic District, the river... it’s quiet.”

This is the sort of conversation that gets people involved in community life, says Alma Couverthie, LCW’s organizing director. “People talk about what they have in common and what they value in their community, and out of this comes a conversation about changes, improvements big and small, that could make a difference.”

Elsewhere, LCW members are engaged in other activities. On the third floor of an old mill building, the corridors outside the LCW offices are bustling. A girls club is meeting, led by two mothers who serve as mentors to the group. Several teenage “young architects” are settling down at drafting tables to begin a class taught by MIT graduate students. A group of would-be homeowners is joining a financial literacy class, while women in the Sewing Club are making children’s clothing and curtains for their homes.

Meanwhile, across the canal, several LCW members are watching a video about the 1917 Bread and Roses mill workers strike in Lawrence. This is part of a community leadership initiative supported by LCW called The PODER Experience. Residents enrolled are active in the LCW network and learning more about the city’s history, including how hard-won changes were brought about through collective efforts in the past.

“We’ve been creating an infrastructure where you can become part of the LCW family network through a number of doors,” Traynor explains.

What matters is that there are a lot of different doors. Once you get in, you know you are in a network; you can look around and see other things you can participate in, and you can get the culture. People who will come in through one kind of door, wouldn’t typically come in through another.

This flexible, broad-based “opportunity structure” changes as people move toward or away from any opportunity. It does not require members to adopt a particular set of ideas or values, or even an allegiance to an organization or to leaders.

In Traynor’s view, an open architecture helps to create a positive orientation toward public life among residents that ultimately fosters good leadership and continuing civic engagement. It starts simply with people recognizing the value of being connected, of sharing experiences, building trust, and then maybe deciding to do something together. This is transformative, says Traynor, the genesis of new collective identities upon which future action can be built.

The Many Doors of LCW

- **Family Asset Building (FAB)** is designed to promote educational advancement and build social capital among residents, FAB includes:
Adult Learning Clubs
 - Computer Skills, IDAs, Savings Club, First Time Homebuyers, English, Computers, Sewing.*Young Professionals*
 - Young Architects, Computer Basics, College Preparation, Creative Writing, Fashion Design, Graphic Design and Animation, Merrimack Math and Science, Money Management, Music Production, IDAs for Youth, Video Production, Web Design, Fun Fridays (relationship building activities for LCW youth), Girl's Corner (empowerment group that addresses topics affecting young women).
- **FAB Committee:** members oversee planning and implementation of FAB activities
- **Neighborhood Revitalization Committees:** members focus on organizing, planning and implementing LCW real estate projects and neighborhood revitalization initiatives.
- **The LCW Board:** is comprised of LCW members who are elected by the wider membership. Board oversees the implementation of initiatives proposed and accepted by members at LCW annual Meetings.
- **LCW Volunteers:** mentor LCW youth, teach classes, help support staff and systems.

Interactions Build the Network

Opening many doors was the beginning, not the end, of developing LCW as a network.

Another approach emanated from a lesson Traynor learned years earlier while working in St. Paul, Minnesota, organizing residents of a poor neighborhood. A woman who had been identified as a local leader attended several meetings, then stopped coming. Most people thought she was deadwood and didn't miss her. But Traynor visited her at home on a Saturday. "There she was at her kitchen table, with two telephones, and lists of people," he recalls. "She was working her networks to beat the band."

Traynor calls this the "Amway phenomenon," after the corporation that built a global network of homemakers who sell Amway products to the people in their social networks and identify strongly with the business. And he carries this lesson from the experience: "If the organizations we form cannot draw out from folks what I saw happening at that kitchen table, then we are not forming the right organizations."

His insight is incorporated into LCW practice in an important way: to use the existing links among people and, especially, those people who naturally connect, like the

woman in St. Paul, to many other people—“hubs” they are called—to extend the reach of the LCW network.

To do this, LCW started using NeighborCircles, in which an LCW member invites local friends and neighbors to get together for dinner and conversation three times in one month. With an LCW staff member or a veteran member facilitating, the conversations are intended to encourage residents to consider what they can do as a group to improve their neighborhood or community. Although it doesn’t always “gel”, according to Couverthie, in the last year, NeighborCircles has increasingly generated new LCW members with links to other networks, as well as new local initiatives that have had wider resonance in the city.

At the same time, LCW staff took other steps to increase connectivity in the network. Traynor and his colleagues hope that people who come in for, say, English classes, will also find their way to other clusters and become active in other ways. They began working to help new members see the “whole” of the network beyond the door through which they had entered. “We have to make sure that what’s happening is visible,” says Marianna Leavy-Sperounis, LCW’s network coordinator, “so that members can concretely identify all the places you can go. Ultimately, communication is what keeps it growing.”

Some LCW members who are highly connected to other people are inclined to guide them into and through the network. Within LCW, these types of members are now explicitly recognized as “weavers” and form hubs in the wider network.

Teofila Richardson: Network Weaver

Originally from the Dominican Republic and LCW member since 2001, Teofila Richardson is a network “weaver.” Her work as a family childcare provider and home pedicurist puts her in contact with many women in her community.

“These are women who do not speak English, they are unemployed, many are single mothers like me. I say to them: if I can do it, you can do it. Come to Lawrence CommunityWorks on Saturday and bring your children. You can meet other people, learn to speak English, learn to use a computer... and many other things.”

In addition, some members now serve as “bridges” to yet other networks. This has happened in Lawrence’s professional communities; the LCW board of directors includes members with connections to the Lawrence Hospital and a local bank. These members have helped to link these institutions with LCW members in the First Time Homebuyers and the Young Professionals clusters [described in sidebar]. Additional LCW links to other networks and organizations include ties to Cambridge College, which awards credit to PODER graduates, and to the Affordable Housing Action Alliance

(AHAA), a coalition of nonprofit housing developers and community groups that advocate for policies and resources for affordable housing in the City.⁴

Gradually, LCW is becoming a network of networks—tapping into, activating, bridging, and enhancing interactions already present in the city.

Types of Members

LCW is a network of some 700 individuals, as many as 300 of whom are very active in the network. Systems are being put in place to distinguish between four categories of members:

1. Old members who are disengaged.
2. Promising new members (people who have expressed an interest in becoming more active in the network).
3. Emerging leaders.
4. People who are consistently playing a leadership role.

LCW's network coordinator acts as a "traffic cop," overseeing new member orientation and managing the network's database. With an updated database, Marianna Levey-Sperounis can track members' movement through the network and identify people who are currently inactive but may want to re-engage.

Structuring the LCW Network for Growth

As participants interact with each other and interactions are repeated, patterns emerge; a network takes on structural shapes that affect its future growth and efficiency. A general picture we developed of the current structure of the Lawrence CommunityWorks reveals several characteristics:

Clusters. Members coalesce around specific LCW activities, projects, and initiatives (in Many Doors sidebar). These participants build connectivity with each other creating dense localized networks or clusters. Clusters, which are adapted to the work of closely sharing information and building skills, may be able to "stand alone," (and often would in other organizational settings). But in the LCW network, coordinators work to create links across clusters. Lately, LCW network builders are working to ensure that members who come in through FAB (LCW's largest door) also connect to other parts of the network

Hubs. Three activities in the network that we described earlier—new member orientations, NeighborCircles, and the work of "weavers"—are designed to create hubs, people who connect people to many other people in the network, not just their at-hand cluster. These sorts of links build greater connectivity across LCW.

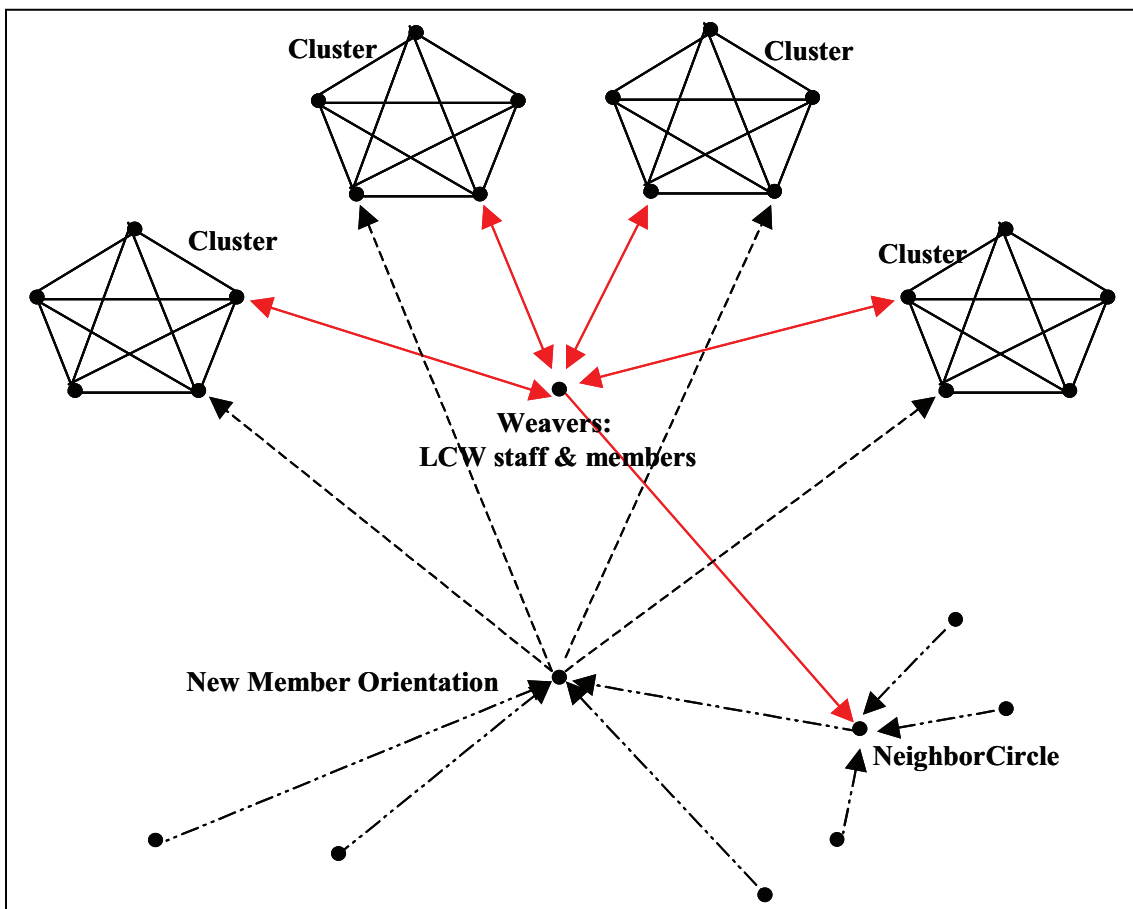
Many Channels. As people in the LCW clusters and NeighborCircles and other hub structures increasingly interact with each other, they create new pathways for

⁴ Members of AHAA are: Bread and Roses Housing, Habitat for Humanity, Lawrence CommunityWorks, Lawrence YMCA, Merrimack Valley Project, Point After Club, Worklinks, and Youth Build.

information flows and decision-making processes. The connectivity in the network will get more dense and efficient. An example is the Girls Club which configured a new cluster. The Girls Club was up and running quickly as founding members connected with and began to organize a new cross-section LCW families.

Horizons. As the LCW network expands and makes connections to more “distant” people, it is less and less possible for anyone to see all the nodes and links that exist; they are occurring beyond the network’s visible “horizon.” Out at that edge, new patterns of connectivity may emerge; surprises happen. “That was a watershed moment: the day I realized I didn’t know everyone in the network,” observes a senior staff member. Traynor tells this story about LCW’s changing horizon: recently, LCW members selected two people for the board of directors that Traynor had never even met.

Latent Ties. Members who do not participate in any part of the network for more than a year are identified as “inactive.” LCW staff and members agree that no stigma should attach to being an inactive member, because it’s important to “meet people where they’re at.” Latent ties are considered potential in the system, however. Participation of any kind has “planted a seed” that can be activated under the right circumstances.



Networks for Social Change

Latent ties? Horizons, hubs, and clusters? Weavers? Open architecture? *This* is what is supposed to revive a down-and-out city? Granted, Lawrence CommunityWorks doesn't sound like a typical CDC or any other community-based organization. But will this work? Where is the network heading? And what does it mean for others seeking to change their communities for the better?

Bill Traynor is not alone in the civil sector in turning to the power of networks. As we point out in the companion report to this one, "Network Power for Nonprofit Organizations and Philanthropy," the civil sector is responding to increasing pressure for results and efficiency, and to the opportunities provided by information technology and the growing knowledge of "network science," by experimenting with, adopting, and spreading approaches that rely on connectivity. The Lawrence CommunityWorks network has many of the same features as other networks for social change: interactions and structure, for example.

In the companion report we used examples of civil-sector networks, including a short version of the LCW story. But some aspects of what is happening in Lawrence seemed to merit a deeper exploration.

First, Traynor and his colleagues are especially thoughtful and intentional about using new knowledge about networks to inform their decisions and actions. They may have stumbled initially into building networks as an alternative to organizations, but they are scrambling quickly up the learning curve.

Second, the "open architecture" approach they have adopted was unique among the cases we examined. It brought to mind the sort of grassroots movement building associated with Saul Alinsky, but was more than an exercise in political power. An innovative application of network strategies to the problem of reconstructing civic leadership and life in an American city, it promised to reveal something interesting about the potential of social networks to deliver large-scale social change.

Finally, while the LCW network is much more than a concept—quite a lot is happening on the ground—it is not fully mature and, therefore, its history is fresh in memory and its challenges are those that others might encounter early in their own efforts to use networks to shape a community's future.

Three Challenges

As Lawrence CommunityWorks evolves, it faces three challenges that we have found are fundamental to the evolution of any social network. Responding to them involves an ongoing balancing act.

The Challenge of Identity—balancing the need to satisfy the interests of individual members with the interests of the network as a whole. In any network, both types of value are present. What matters is how they are balanced. If members are too focused on the interests of the network as a whole, some individuals will lose their sense of connectivity to the network. If, on the other hand, too many people are just concerned about their individual interests, the network will not have enough connectivity and energy to maintain itself and grow. This is an issue that Lawrence CommunityWorks is

currently addressing: many individuals join LCW to access resources and services through FAB. LCW network builders are helping these members see that family asset building is also community asset-building by linking them to other things that are going on in the network. Another factor also poses an identity challenge: most members of the LCW network are women, in the majority from the Dominican Republic—and the majority of these are from the same Pentecostal church community. This homogeneity may threaten the prospect for maintaining a broad, open network identity.

The Challenge of Governance—balancing the need of individual network members to decide and act on their own with the need to decide and act as a collectivity. Decision-making in social networks is often described as informal or based on consensus. What lies behind this is individuals with many choices of action who nevertheless share common purposes and “rules”. LCW’s network practice has produced shared understandings about the value of connecting and becoming engaged. As a result, Traynor and his colleagues are in the process of shifting control of the network from the staff/originators to the members. “In the early stages we knew the most, were most clued in, most interested,” says Traynor. “We want that to change. We have a healthy number of board members who get it; a healthy number of activists who get it.”

The Challenge of Adaptation—balancing the need to maintain the network’s existing processes and structures with the need to innovate and change. Continuity allows a certain predictability while network members assess their experiences and compare and copy successful activities. On the other hand, nimble adaptation allows the network to creatively transform new information into new practices, and to respond quickly to changes in their external environment. For LCW members and staff this challenge has meant a continuing effort to be, as Traynor puts it, “sensitive to resonance” - meaning that when they see what is happening in the network, they connect it to other things that are happening. For instance, in 2002, several NeighborCircles signaled interest in the use of alleyways. Traynor and staff connected residents across Circles and used the resources of the CDC to research ownership issues. A more comprehensive initiative is emerging in the North Common called COOL (Claiming Our Open Land). COOL in turn has the potential to connect various efforts to take back, reinvent, and use open spaces *across the city*, linking people everywhere in Lawrence.

Finally, to keep the network adaptive, Traynor recommends that at all planning be *provisional* (no immutable master plan). “We put a premium on flexibility, fluidity, informality, and real accomplishments”. If the focus is on doing - planning and executing in phases - then a barrier is eliminated: more people can join, catch up, contribute. For example, neighbors may first organize to clean up the alleys behind their houses, next organize to find out who owns the alleys, then join with other residents to develop proposals for use and maintenance of the land. Each step may be discussed initially, but there can be lots of adjustments along the way.

Staying Power

These challenges mark LCW as a network, a form of organizing that places the highest premium on connectivity. Of course, organizations also worry about identity, governance, and adaptation. But most organizations keep their customers on the outside—LCW has brought them in as members—and therefore they take on an identity that subordinates everything to the collective “corporate” identity. Most organizations also “lead from the top,” whether through elected or appointed leaders. LCW, as a CDC, also has a board of directors and staff, but it intends to decentralize its control as much as possible. And most organizations wrestle with the problem of adaptation, but it is quite difficult for them to maintain the provisional approach to purpose, strategies, plans, and actions that LCW uses. “We’re quick to adapt,” says Traynor—a claim few organizations can make.

Will this big bet on connectivity pay off?

The LCW network is not yet as large or as connected as it needs to be to create a capacity for civic leadership that transforms Lawrence. This could be a matter of time. Traynor estimates it will take a decade for the network to evolve and produce the outcomes he and others envision. Does this network have the staying power for the long haul? Can it perform enough good deeds to attract support? Can it raise the community’s expectations, and then meet them? Can it balance its identity, governance, and adaptations in ways that allow it to thrive? Or will the network tend to become more of a formal organization and succumb to what Traynor hoped to avoid? Will it simply run out of steam?

What will happen, of course, is up to the residents of Lawrence. Will they value LCW as a vehicle for them to engage with each other in shaping the future of their community? Will they value connectivity? There was a hopeful sign in the words of Ana Luisa Cabral, a network member and NeighborCircle host. Speaking in Spanish, she said, “The more of us who come together, the more power we have.” That was the network talking.