SHEPHERDING CHANGE – AN AMATS RETROSPECT

LEADING BY LEARNING

The 2014 Switching Gears Active Transportation Conference - How a Metropolitan Planning Organization set the tone for community and economic revitalization in the Rust Belt City of Akron, Ohio.
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Background:

On June 26, 2014, AMATS (The Akron Metropolitan Area Transportation Study…Akron’s regional planning organization), conducted its first ever Switching Gears’ Active Transportation Conference. Switching Gears has been an ongoing program in Akron for several years to promote biking as an alternate mode of transportation to improve health and to enjoy the many attributes of urban life and the unique character of greater Akron.

From initial planning of the conference, AMATS focused on a non-traditional approach to encourage community action. This was consistent with their efforts and experiences on existing programs and built on the emerging culture of the Akron biking community.

As an immediate result of the conference, a subgroup formed to follow up on a presentation around a program called “Better Blocks.” The program had been started in Texas some years ago and been practiced on an international basis with varying degrees of success. The conference and follow on with Better Blocks created a distinctive, quick and positive community reaction. As a result, a Retrospect was commissioned to understand how to repeat, scale, and further enhance the dramatic success through the end of January 2015.

What Is a Retrospect?

The Retrospect takes a collaborative approach to “deep learning” around key strategic, and typically, collaborative action.

Often times we do not fully understand what we are looking for in repeatable patterns, approaches, and actions that have led to success. It is critical that organizations take the time to step back and look at projects to identify and try to insure key learnings embed into routine processes and thinking. In many cases failed efforts (or aspects of overall successes that did not work as expected) also provide important insights into learning for ongoing success. The Retrospect then, is a core component towards achieving sustained continuous improvement.
This document focuses on three main areas: Planning of the Switching Gears Conference, creating “The Ripples of Change”, and, finally, how the changes were nurtured into self-sustaining community progress. The learnings surround these key questions:

1. What does it take for a conference’s design to consistently inspire attendees to take a community into taking steps toward a self-supporting effort?
2. How do we insure action is sustained and that success and learning are spread (in this case through the Greater Akron Region)?
3. What are the key roles, approaches, preparation and intents to make this level of success to happen routinely?

CONFERENCE PLANNING

Conference planning had been initiated by AMATS. Early on, the plan was actively supported by The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, at their request, to provide funding to help execute an active transportation conference promoting the ideas of alternative transportation, provide access to nationally recognized speakers, and to creating a dialogue around how to move an agenda forward in Akron. It is important to note that AMATS had already established a strong reputation as thought leader and partner within the community. For example, the presence of Executive Director Jason Segedy’s blog (“Notes from the Underground”) had established AMATS leadership as part of a forward thinking organization even though there is no official connection between the organization and the blog. This was clearly an important learning in the Retrospect - showing a leadership who wanted to put clarity around ideas, observations, and even dreams for discovery and discussion in their community.

To assist in capture and application of learning, this Retrospect has packaged its findings into “10 Action Areas:”
Focus on Why
Specificity
Targeted Breakout Sessions
Branding – with Cause
Approach from the Non-Traditional and the Fringes
Get Speakers to Explore Your City
Don't Wait for Permission to Act
Tangible Finite Action
Intentionality
Place, People and Their Relationship

You will find stories and key quotes (insights to help remember what we learned). Since this is intended as a living document, however, we anticipate (and hope) changes are made…as change is made and we continue to learn and progress Akron.

Since this Retrospect document focuses on learning, a separate document has been provided with specific recommendations for AMATS.

Focus on WHY

At the center of the planning strategy, the AMATS team made a concerted effort to continuously ask why they were having certain speakers, and why the breakout sessions would be what they eventually were. By establishing that they were going to learn along the way and push themselves to ask the hard questions about why they were making certain decisions it created a culture of collaboration that would permeate to the conference’s attendees.

The importance of the question “why?” went deeper though. Focusing on why an organization exists and what your final product is supposed to effect is paramount for creating any meaningful impact. In this case, the citizens of Akron are the customers of this government organization. AMATS is responsible for providing positive transportation outcomes that enhance commerce and quality of life for the citizenry of their region. If we look at the holistic “why are we having a conference?” and the answer is to improve the quality of transportation for our customers then the planning focus can be on how do we improve tangible outcomes, not on how do we have a good conference. With that focus in mind for each step of the project we can then attack not our obstacles but rather our greater understanding of how the mission, from the top to the bottom of an organization, can build an outcome.

Jason Segedy, AMATS Executive Director, highlights the words of the Mayor of Madison, who continuously asked the question “why we want Madison to be this way, instead of focusing on the how. It’s easy for us to get stuck on the nuts and bolts of how, but if we focus on the why we can actually get somewhere.” This is spot on for what we have learned through this process. Continuously challenging ourselves to ask “Why?” gets our organization and our planning process into a cycle of learning, that can help achieve breakthrough performance. In the case of what emerged from North Hill, it was clear that the “Why?” was because North Hill had a clear and strong personality it wanted to both express and to own. Why leads to passion…passion to action. Passion motivates people.

“If we focus on the why, we can actually get somewhere.” Jason Segedy
Specificity

A key lesson learned is to be extremely specific on the content of the conference. In this case AMATS focused on Biking and to take it further “How biking can impact urban revitalization”. By focusing in on this one distinct subject AMATS was able to build a program that exemplified a target demographic of people with a tendency for action. Biking, in particular, had a history of events and physical activity. The audience was there to learn more about the benefits of biking as well as the people who wanted to learn how to make their city and neighborhood a better place by biking. People coming together from different demographics to engage around one clear topic, with a clear intention of learning, and with a set of speakers who had track records in action. The reaction and its outcomes were inevitable.

Krista Beniston, who was the planning coordinator for the event said “The things that are most valuable for me are very specific, new ideas that you can take immediately and bring back to your community and get to work on.” She also went on to talk about how you have to remember that everyone in the room is already on board with your topic. If you market accordingly, everyone already knows what they are there for. You don’t have to waste time convincing the attendees that alternative transportation is a good idea. A conference planners charge is to give the attendees an opportunity to do something in their own communities with the specific information that you provide.

One of the other clear distinctions of this conference was its pension for detail. The case was built quite compellingly that this reinforced both AMATS strategic intent to get action and its recognition that attendees who want action also want the detail to support their needs. They do not want their time wasted…and they are, after all, the ones you want to “launch” from the conference. Specificity is both in content AND intent.

Targeted Breakout Sessions

Breakout sessions are a hallmark of most conferences but AMATS made a specific effort to actually break down some of the ideas that their keynote speakers had discussed. From the nuts and bolts efforts of how to actually do a Better Block Project to creating a Bike Share, the breakout sessions had an element of enhancing and zeroing in on the specificity of how we actually do some of the actions that the speakers got the participants excited about. And speakers were most excited at being allowed to talk about these themes…and helping Akron move forward.

Tina Ughrin of Smile Minded Smartworks who attended the event said that “It wasn’t the typical panel, there was something different about how this (one) is structured, the panelists were sharing ideas and you were able to see new ideas being created right in front of you.” She attended the Bike Share Panel that had subject matter experts from around the state who had participated in different programs. Having a different perspective was unbelievably important to her and even though she doesn’t know if a bike share will happen in Akron, she now knows where to go to get the information to start one if someone were so inclined to do so in Akron.

Approach from the Non-Traditional and the Fringes

The first thought of the AMATS’ Executive Director when he was approached with the idea of Jason Roberts speaking at the event on Better Blocks was “well, that’s fine but what does he have to do with
Bikes?" This is a completely understandable question when you are planning an active transportation conference around biking. Where the learning comes in was the realization that “we were willing to go outside of the scope a little bit to support getting into action on biking and not just hammer down on the exact topic.” Someone was compelled to make a “new” bike path with spray paint in front of the Conference hall. This action served up that point quite nicely.

“Approaching from the non-traditional allowed us to push out of our comfort zones.” Krista Beniston

Krista Beniston said “That was the turning point that pushed us into not being your traditional conference… it pushed us out of our comfort zone.” To push yourself to become better at your job and to achieve your goals always comes when you go outside of your comfort zone. That is when you achieve personal and professional…and community growth.

Also look at working on the ‘fringes. “Looking at the peripheries gives an organization the opportunity to do something different, and to stand out. Bikes are in the perimeter, so was North Hill.” The strategic logic is fairly straightforward. Trying to do efforts in the center of a large community will likely challenge status quo - a potentially daunting task. Taking efforts to the smaller, less vested parts of the community allows for much greater freedom, appreciation, and acceptance…particularly for the non-traditional approaches and the success it can bring.

Branding – with Cause

One of the things that drew Tina and John Ughrin to come to the conference was the branding. AMATS had created a campaign called “Switching Gears,” invested in the design of that to be inclusive of community bike events and a reputation of action with bikers. Brand is what people see, not what people say and Switching Gears is a brand built around action. If AMATS would have marketed this conference under their AMATS logo, it would have been seen as “another government exercise” and not as the inclusive type of conference the organization wanted it to be.

“We created Switching Gears to create an online and offline community,” said Krista. That intentionality to create a brand that brings people together around an idea is what sets apart a good marketing campaign. Since Switching Gears inception the idea was to bring people together even before they knew it would turn into a conference. Segedy states that “There was intent behind that, we didn’t necessarily want people to come to an AMATS event because of the baggage that can come from that. People might think this is an insider conversation? Am I allowed to go to that? Switching Gears is intended to be a community not an organization” How we self-describe is how we project. A brand for a conference should always be built on how we create relationships, a community and a movement. Genuine and authentic in a clear Brand – is huge. If something is worth building, do it to last, and nothing lasts longer than an honest relationship. This is the heart of good branding and the heart of creating a worthwhile gathering.
Get Speakers to Explore Your City

Practicing what the event was supposed to be preaching was extremely important to adding a level of participation from the speakers of the event. (Note the recurring theme of “detail” – the audience saw the intention of this conference in every detail…as did the speakers!!) We must always remember that we are planning a conference and also in most cases paying the speakers to come. It is paramount that the speakers can relate to the audience and there is no better way than letting them experience the city through the eyes of a regular citizen, in this case taking a neighborhood bike ride and exploring downtown on foot. This was noticeable in both presenters presentations as they both brought up tidbits that they had picked up the evening before the event.

“I would definitely recommend that you do a bike ride and have a dinner, it was a nice way to informally get to know them. Otherwise, they would have arrived in the morning, I would have said hi, nice to meet you and they would have left. Eating together is a great way to get to know someone at a basic level.” Jason Roberts decided to come back and Krista said that “creating a relationship with him as one of the key reasons that he wanted to do a Better Block in Akron – like we all did.” Segedy found that “People took the time to talk to Roberts about what was going on here.”

We discussed whether a speaker who had not shown this level of commitment was viable. The learning suggested that it might not be a time to “pass” on that speaker…but you better manage things much more carefully. The implication on the entire conference and its outcomes might be at risk.

Don’t Wait for Permission to Act

One of the recommendations for the Better Block originally was for it to occur 60-90 days from the ideas introduction. The idea behind this is to harness as much momentum as possible and not get stuck in the planning cycle of waiting for permission to have an opinion on what your neighborhood can be. Not to slip back to comfort zones. It’s our goal to be continuously doing, continuously learning. Tony Kuhel said “this is a slippery slope. Going into a comfort zone that goes back to asking for approval versus “screw it we’re going to do it” can take real courage.” John Ughrin followed up with “people in our area tend to wait to allow for rescue from someone on high… if anything is going to change we (as a citizenry) are going to have to do it our self. I hope this program gets people to get in the mindset of we can change things, right here on our own and that is part of our success.” This was a learning that had not fully been shared – participants were strongly aligned as it emerged.

“If anything is going to change, we (as a citizenry) are going to have to do it ourselves.” John Ughrin

On the other side, it was decided, due to the impending winter, that it was best for us to push out of the traditional 60-90 day window. It was learned that this extra time allowed for a new leadership group to form and emerge in North Hill, discussion and brainstorming to happen, tours of area to happen (also see the story of “The Better Block Project” in the appendix). Many good things happened by virtue of the delay – however, the learning around the slippery slope of losing our edge was a sobering
conversation at the Retrospect. A powerful lesson for vigilance in making sure communities avoid falling back to old, self-limiting ways of working.

Segedy stated “‘They’ have to become ‘we,’ or even me, for any of this to be effective.” Also a possible fallback scenario is to wait for a hero to emerge to complete what everyone knows must be accomplished. The community’s goal needs to be for each member to become that hero.

Tangible Finite Action

“You need something tangible for people to rally around.” Segedy said. Before planning a conference have in mind what people can build together. John Ughrin said that “In Akron we come from a blue collar background and we get excited about getting out and doing something.” The Better Block was extremely attractive to the attendees because people are clamoring for the opportunity to pick up a hammer and work side by side with their neighbors again. Anytime you are planning an event that brings people together to talk, it is imperative that you have an idea of what the follow up action will be before you ever meet. This is something that AMATS now incorporates into their Before Action Meetings (or BAMS).

At the end of the conference AMATS utilized an action that they had been doing around the area called a Bike and Brainstorm. This gave the ability to explore downtown Akron from a bike seat. Actually putting into action what the conference was preaching. This type of action and proof of commitment to the cause is one of the main items that established legitimacy that AMATS was striving towards action oriented results.

In this situation it was The Better Block project in North Hill but it can be anything from a Sidewalk Snow Shoveling Event that has been proposed by the North Hill Community Leaders before their meetings at the local library or a Summit Lake Clean Up that has been proposed by Nolan James of Kenmore. Giving people that opportunity to sweat together builds the opportunity to create relationships. Always give people the ability to leave a place better than they found it.

Intentionality

Initially it seemed that the intended outcomes seen now were not seen as “exactly intentional.” The AMATS planning team saw intentionality around “doing something – we just were not sure what that was going to be,” according to Krista. And it was clear AMATS did all of the right things to create an environment that could, in fact, handle outcomes…and to be OK with not knowing what action might happen. This was clearly a profound learning that, when shared in the Retrospect, was embraced. Sometimes letting go is the right approach.

Josh McManus, formerly the Akron Director for the Knight Foundation and currently a Problem Solver for Rock Ventures Gaming in Detroit, said “I’ve been to conferences that no subject matter experts were there, and I’ve been to conferences that are user directed. The intentionality of design towards an environment that can create outcomes is what makes the difference. I don’t think it’s a matter of money, time, or location. It’s a matter of will, intent and good design.”
“The intentionality of design towards an environment that can create outcomes is what makes the difference.” Josh McManus

This statement encompasses many of the lessons we have learned thus far. Clarity and a tradition of good design, community will, and personal intent are the driving factors that create a contagious culture of inclusiveness and of action. If the branding had not lead from a history of inclusion who would have wanted to come? The efforts to make time to focus in on details in all aspects of the conference – including the seemingly simple step of bringing people together for one of its trademark Bike-N-Brainstorms after the conference. All signaled a total saturation of “intentionality” inside and outside of the conference center. AMATS planning team had the will to go above and beyond to make sure this conference was methodically planned out, that the details were covered and executed...in many ways freeing attendees to focus themselves on dealing with unknown action resulting from the conference.

**Place, People and Their Relationships**

“Places matter because they are built for people... we make things so abstract when we talk about zoning. Many projects seem to mistake the means for the end.” Segedy said in reference to what action is meant to be. People feel a strong connection to where they are from or where they live. Peter Kageyama, an Akron native and Author, states in his book “For The Love of Cities” that “When cities make themselves easier to connect with emotionally - when they make themselves more loveable - they invite the human heart to become a driver of community, economic and social development.” Kageyama was so influential to AMATS that they asked him to speak at the organizations Annual Meeting, which was another resounding success having nearly double the participation of any previous Annual Meeting. When we have the opportunity to create this connection between a conference attendee and the community the conference is being held in, it is important that we have design in the ability to seize it. When we plan a conference we must always attempt to be a catalyst for this kind of action. And be prepared to take that as far as is necessary to make action happen. Connecting people and place is where we create the opportunity for real, tangible outcomes to sprout up where we never imagined they would.

“We tried to think of different groups that we don’t normally associate with, and that’s one of the reasons we got a lot of people that aren’t our normal membership,” said Krista. Throughout the planning process AMATS focused on building relationships with new organizations and reaching beyond their normal. “You felt welcome as soon as you showed up with the Bike Valet group that was smiling to greet you and take care of your bike!!” Said Tina Ughrin. This attention to detail is something that creates a strong sense of welcoming – whether you had a bike or not. When a person feels welcomed to a new place their ability to explore and share increases greatly.

“When Cities make themselves easier to connect with emotionally - they make themselves more loveable - they invite the human heart to become a driver of community, economic and social development.” Peter Kageyama
AMATS did an excellent job of building relationships outside of their normal network to achieve success. People came to Akron to attend this event from Youngstown, Cleveland, Pittsburgh and Columbus and that is a testament to how they focused on making new friends being open, welcoming and inviting. It wasn’t just the relationship between people that they focused on, relationship to place was also important. This is a topic that has been explored deeply by the aforementioned Peter Kageyama and we would recommend reading *For the Love of Cities* as a case study for ideas to incorporate into your conference planning.

**Closing Observations**

We gave you the 10 things that we would strongly consider implementing into the planning process of any event that you wish to have a tangible outcome. We hope we have given a good showing of “why” throughout - the source of passion for what is happening in Akron as a result of a conference.

It is by no means the be-all end-all document for event planning but a guideline to build. AMATS proved that tangible outcomes can occur if you focus on relationship building between people and the places they spend their time. Continuing to ask yourself as an organization questions that begin with “Why?” is paramount to creating the type of lasting change we should all strive for in community development. AMATS did not necessarily approach this event with the intentionality that we might tend to want to recommend, however, understanding the steps they took to deal with undefined tangible outcomes created the opportunity for the community to set out on the path that they have since blazed as their own.

The planning process for an event can be made into a fun exercise (journey) when your end goal is to have a lasting impact on your community. This creates the opportunity for everyone to grow in their relationship with their places and gives the attendees and the planners alike a shared experience that can be the building block for long-term success in urban renewal efforts.

The ripples of this event have been felt throughout Akron and in the next section we provide some stories and additional insights into the peripheral elements that have been built from the ongoing success of this event.
THE BETTER BLOCK PROJECT

“The “Better Block” project is a demonstration tool that acts as a living charrette so that communities can actively engage in the build out process and provide feedback in real time.” Explains the website betterblock.org. This project came out of the Switching Gears Conference and is the main action item we have been discussing throughout this Retrospect. Jason Roberts, the founder of Team Better Block from Texas, spoke at the conference and people like Tina and John Ughrin knew they had to step up to the plate and create one in their own community. Krista Beniston, Jason Segedy and Josh McManus brought Jason Roberts back to Akron after the conference to begin the process of site selection and the Strike Team helped institute a strategy to maintain momentum leading up The North Hill Better Block in May of 2015.

Tina and John were so excited after the conference that they were scouting out locations in their neighborhood while they were riding their bikes home from the conference. “It was a big shift from my experience with politicians, always look at a city as a problem to solve. Here we are looking at making it a cool place to live. We are going to make it happen not solve a problem.” Tina felt so strongly about the presentation at the conference that she immediately sent a Twitter message to Jason Segedy telling him that they intended to replicate the Better Block Project in their neighborhood. Many people shared Tina’s vision for action in Akron. There was a strong community outpouring in the West Hill Neighborhood around Maple St. and Firestone Park had advocates rooting for a Better Block. The beauty of the program is that nothing is telling these neighborhoods they can’t do it, and in fact quite the opposite, all of the neighborhoods get an opportunity to learn from the North Hill event and taking the time to record our lessons learned and created knowledge assets both on paper and in people in order to increase the chance for success greatly.

Site Selection

Team Better Block has a lot of experience in site selection and the base their selection process on a matrix that ranks the potential sites in a few categories.
Safety - Real and Perceived. Does it feel safe to cross the street or stand on the sidewalk?

Shared Access - Do pedestrians and bicycles feel welcomed? Is it easily accessible to where people live? Are there amenities that allow people to linger?

Stay Power – How can we encourage people to visit the area and have them linger and invite their friends? Are there food options, outdoors? Games? Is the identity of the area prominent?

8-80, dog owners – are there amenities that create invitations for children, seniors and dog owners on a block? These groups tend to be indicators of a healthy environment that feels welcome and attracts other people.

Krista Beniston and Jason Segedy assembled a list of potential Better Block locations and a selection committee was formed that included Jason Roberts, Rick Stockburger and Josh McManus. After spending an entire day looking at several amazing locations the group selected the Temple Square area of North Hill neighborhood. It was important to be inclusive during the selection process and understanding the amount of community buy in was important so providing opportunities for citizens like Tina and John Ughrin to show off their neighborhood to the committee was extremely important. This gave the selection committee the ability to gauge public interest as well as identify key community leaders that would have to bear the weight of the community organizing.

Tina said “At the beginning I thought I had an extra 5-10 hours a week to commit to this but it quickly turned into 20 and at times could get overwhelming.” Creating a Better Block is a big undertaking but Tina and John have found community partners to take on more responsibility. She found people like
Maria Mancinelli and the North Hill Community Leaders that emerged to be champions of the project. Maria said she found out about the project at the Ward 2 meeting that Jason Segedy spoke at with Akron City Councilman Jim Hurley. Maria does community outreach for the International Institute of Akron which brings over 500 new refugees into the city every year. It was a natural fit for her to get leaders from the different ethnic groups involved. Other members of the community have stepped up to the point that over 100 people came to hear Jason Roberts speak and talk about the project when he returned in December of 2014. Maria created market tours that have been kicking off monthly leading up to the Better Block project. The January market tour will also double as the #Akron2Akron tour for this month which showcases the synergy between organizations that aren’t attempting to replicate each other but work together in a meaningful way. The goal for organizing is to give people the opportunity to work and play together leading up to the celebration that is the event. There has been talk of snow shoveling before community events to give attendees the opportunity to work up a little bit of sweat together and make their community better for the people whom walking is their primary form of transportation.

The team has engaged local business and property owners as well as the citizens who live there. Community organizing can be described as bringing a group of people together who live in proximity to each other that acts in their shared self-interest. When social capital is brought into the mix an organizer can create a fantastic sense of belonging. If the focus is on people, and how we interact the outcomes can quickly become tangible. American’s are known for building things, and when two or more get together the opportunity to create can be realized.

Jason Roberts originally recommended that The Better Block project happened 60-90 days after the initial introduction of a potential project. The reasoning behind this is to embrace the momentum and to get into action quickly and don’t get lost in the details of planning that gets in the way of design charrettes and the likes. Akron, went against this mold for a couple of reasons. Namely, how unpredictable the weather in Ohio can be in October and November. Also, Josh McManus said “It won’t be a bad idea to have the first one executed extremely well due to an intentional planning process” Akron certainly is behind the idea for subsequent ones to happen on that time from but with the weather and the new project the planners, including Jason Roberts of Team Better Block thought it was best to push the project to the spring. The difference Akron is taking is in the market tours Maria Mancinelli has been planning and that they are continuing to engage the residents throughout the winter. It is establishing connections they never had around a project that more and more people wish to become involved with.
There is a distinct opportunity to build on The Better Block project. Once the North Hill event is conducted the Strike Team can utilize the lessons learned from the first action and they are building up a base of interest with the #Akron2Akron walking tours to replicate the process throughout the city. Through their strategic initiatives they are creating a log of buy in from around the city as well as identifying new potential sites for more projects. The idea of fail small has been one that has guided The Better Block project. John Ughrin said, “If we throw a Better Block and it somehow fails miserably what are we out? Time spent with our neighbors working on our problems and less than $5,000 as a community?” If a design plan fails that the city undertakes the city could potentially be out millions and never create the community relationships that The Better Block Project provides. #Akron2Akron takes this one step further as most of the tours can be done on a zero dollar budget. So the organization is only out some sweat equity and relationship building time. If an #Akron2Akron tour doesn’t work, we can assume a Better Block project probably won’t work in those areas, or at least will not work the way we conducted the tour. Fail fast and fail small is important to building lasting meaningful projects, the ability to test in the street is a founding principal of Escalys’ “Learn by Doing” mantra. The Better Block project is in good hands and continued learning is the only way to not just ensure its success in North Hill but to ensure its replication throughout the city.
THE RIPPLES OF CHANGE

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. For, indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.” - Margaret Mead.

The following material and stories were briefly discussed in the Retrospect and are expanded on here to set a context for the importance of small groups in cementing the success of the Switching Gears Active Transportation Conference.

Leading up to the conference Jason Segedy posed the question “I know there are people in Akron that are doing great things, but who are they and how do we work with them?” Having this mindset leading up the conference is one of the things that made it such a success but following through on answering that question has been the catalyst to establish a new network of thoughtful, committed citizens. The group has dubbed itself The Strike Team and has rallied around certain causes that have attempted to move the needle forward to create excitement about being proactively involved in the re-imagining of Akron.

Josh McManus said that “In my work I’ve never seen more than 5 champions and usually it’s one to three, and then a coalition of the willing which is usually never more than 12 to 13.” In Escalys parlance this is what we refer to as a Community of Practice. The Strike Team has been an informal version of this with each individual playing a key role in the process. The individuals of The Strike Team all have their own recognized strengths and weaknesses but Kyle Kutuchief, the Akron Interim Director for the Knight Foundation, said he would have approached our first meetings differently by saying, “I wish I would have known that all of these people had so many talents, you get to know people over a couple of months so in retrospect I would have focused less on the initial meetings with the problems of the Better Block and focused more on tell me about you, and what you’ve been doing and through these neighborhood tours is how I’ve learned more about John and Tina and Jeremy and their backstories. The talent of this team is what is going to make this thing go.” Creating opportunities for people to work and get in the mud together is the best way to build a relationship with a new group. There are multiple ideas on how to facilitate meetings but the best outcomes time and time again have been when the facilitator creates a scenario for the attendees to build sweat equity in their new relationships.

“The talent of this team is what is going to make this thing go.” Kyle Kutuchief

Sweat Equity is defined by Amy Mathews of DIY Network as “a party’s contribution to a project in the form of effort.” This idea dovetails into Robert Putnam’s idea of social capital which is “the very fabric of our connectors with each other” Putnam’s idea of social capital is that two people working together towards a single goal will achieve more than two individuals working separately towards the same goal. The answer to how do we make 1+1=3. The idea of creating a Strike Team came from Segedy’s desire to not only begin asking the tough questions about how do we make a city better but actually providing a framework for action to solve some of those problems.
The first attendees of The Strike Team meetings were Jason Segedy of AMATS, Rick Stockburger of Escalys, Kyle Kutuchief of The Knight Foundation, Nicole Mullet of The University of Akron, Dina Younis of the GAR Foundation, Josh McManus of The Knight Foundation, Nichole Booker of The United Way of Summit County, Nolan James of Ernst and Young, Jeremy Lile of City Hope and Tina and John Ughrin of Smile Minded Smartworks. Everyone brought individual talents and connections to the table to spawn action. The original plan for the Strike Team was provide programming and engagement for The North Hill Neighborhood to create a buzz around the impending Better Block Project that we will discuss in the next section. The coalition found multiple opportunities to deploy and engage in the community.
This photograph was created by Colleen Segedy which illustrates a highly important piece of history that was lost to the North Hill Community of Akron, Ohio. This was one of the very first items that the Strike Team mobilized around (it was small, had much passion, was quickly achievable), creating a twitter campaign to contact the new owners of the Building, People’s Bank, and attempt to salvage a piece of our history. In the last section we discussed how important it is to create and maintain connections to our places and this bank has been an institution in North Hill since 1921. The Strike Team understood that things come and go but the loss of the sign was a significant blow to the perception of the neighborhood.

Nicole Mullet and Josh McManus met with the new tenants who had to quickly change signage over the weekend to open as People’s Bank of Marietta, Ohio and regrettably knew that they had made a mistake in the disposal of the sign. They said that things happened very quickly and apologized for the
mistake. Due to this interaction, the bank has become committed to the neighborhood and moving forward as a new business, reaching out to the refugee community that the International Institute of Akron brings into North Hill and has been an outstanding civic minded business. The Strike Team being nimble in nature, was able to craft a quick response and open a dialogue for community engagement that would not have been there had Jason Segedy not asked the question “Who are the people in Akron that are engaged?” when he started the planning for The Switching Gears Conference. Shown to the right is what has been salvaged of the North Akron Savings Bank sign.

“If the sign had not been destroyed, the “n” might never have become important to anyone. Perhaps the learning here is about other things we do not pay attention to? Perhaps this is the “n” for “never forget.””

Having an event to react to can be an amazing catalyst for change. The best thing that could have happened to North Hill and The Strike Team in this case was to have a piece of tradition to rally on. Losing the sign signaled an opportunity to deploy and engage our small group tactics and begin to have an appreciative understanding for the history. If the sign would have never been destroyed the “N” would have never been important. It is only when we lost something that we had the opportunity to begin to restore something even more powerful. Community.

This action changed a lot for the way the bank engages the community. They are now an active participant in The Better Block project. They are participating by allowing some of their buildings to be used as store fronts for new businesses and also potentially providing loans and lines of credit to immigrant business owners. If the strike team hadn’t engaged the bank in honest meaningful dialogue the neighborhood may have never had such a strong ally as The People’s Bank.

The Strike Team is currently in the process of repurposing the “N” into something to carry on the tradition of the neighborhood. They are fielding ideas from the people that live there and will hopefully find a repurposing of it during the Better Block Project in May of 2015.

#Akron2Detroit

The Strike Team was heavily embedded into the Knight Foundation’s #Akron2Detroit trip which was an opportunity to conduct a highly regarded peer assist style trip. When Josh McManus took the position of Akron Director for The Knight Foundation he had multiple conversations that the conclusion was “I just want to show you what we did in Detroit.” In true strike team fashion, a quick decisive action occurred create an opportunity for a group of young people to travel from Akron to Detroit for 36 hours to learn
from the town where Akron shipped its tires to make the world roll on rubber. This group of young people was excited at the opportunity to get out of town and learn from a city that as Jason Segedy says “doesn’t have to make false dichotomous choices of being good or bad, it can be both and that’s ok.”

The trip was able to inspire many ideas and new connections spun out of that would have never been imagined. In response to learning about the D-HIVE, Josh McManus Detroit invention, The Self Advancement Center was spawned in Akron by Aa’Rron Epps. This is a place that will offer working space for entrepreneurs to work and collaborate. Lauren Ward of Noto Boutique created a map of downtown business to share with potential shoppers and The Strike Team set out to create #Akron2Akron which are neighborhood level engagements across the city.

Several of the attendees are continuing action in a peer assist to maintain open communication with their counterparts in Detroit. The purpose of a Peer Assist is to learn from other people that are doing similar things with great tangible outcomes. The real power of the Peer Assist is when we learn from other doers we can create better outcomes than the original actors and share them with our peers we learned from to help them achieve world-class results.

The Strike Team has been able to get people off of their recliners and out on their porches again, looking for opportunities to create and be a part of a community.

#Akron2Akron

When the trip reconvened in Akron the idea was brought up that it was amazing to go and look at what other cities had to offer but we all had a lot to learn and share about the groups own communities. AMATS took the lead once again on compiling data and maps to showcase the state of different neighborhoods and to have a view of their history. The Strike Team tested out the model in Kenmore, led by Nolan James, and Crestland Park Neighborhood, led by Jeremy Lile, before opening the first tour up to the general public in Firestone Park Neighborhood. This tour was conducted on December 20th of 2014, 5 days before Christmas in 35 degree weather. Nearly 40 people showed up to learn about a community many had never been to as well as some people from Firestone Park engaged in learning about the place they reside. Judging by the turnout, The Strike Team was able to judge that people in the city are clamoring for opportunities to learn and contribute to the redevelopment of the urban fabric. The tour was so well received that it received press in The Cleveland Plain Dealer, The Knight Foundations Blog, and local radio stations.
The tour has morphed into a monthly get together of 50 people and has also had a documentary screening of *Red, White and Blueprints: A Rust Belt Documentary*. The North Hill Market Tour is next and both that and the film screening sold out of spots in less than 24 hours.

The Strike Team has been a catalyst for change in Akron that has been a nimble enough to react to on the ground efforts but forward thinking enough to be proactive in the conversation process. Creating the ability to be inclusive and get people off of their recliners and out on their porches again, looking for opportunities to create and be a part of a community, not just wait for the next bad thing to happen. The Strike Team while being informal has had the innate ability to adapt and overcome all of the obstacles it has come across and its depth and breadth of knowledge is an asset to any community. We recommend that any city encourage a small group of young people to act at every opportunity possible and that every Metropolitan Planning Organization make a conscious effort to identify and attract these types of young people to contribute.
CONCLUSION – THIS CHAPTER

Throughout this Retrospect we have highlighted lessons learned as they directly pertain to each topic and that, we believe help culminate in tangible actions. The real change, however, is in the way we begin to think…as noted in the Retrospect, to think about creating a new future for our communities and not about solving them like a problem. Couple with this the importance of having our eyes on the why our organizations and our citizens exist and who they are meant to serve and we see relationships that build between people. Our places surge into something more meaningful, more impactful than words could ever surmise as we build our way forward together.

To honor our traditions we must always move it towards a goal of being better and of relentlessly learning and creating together.

Tradition is something we all have a sense of – whether we realize it or not. In our cities we know that something great was accomplished here and that we have a sense of duty to uphold that greatness. Tradition is the transmission of customs or beliefs from generation to generation. What did our ancestors build? What are we to uphold? More importantly, why were their structures important? Were they structures of brick and steel or were they structures of the mind? Our cities were built to be great places fueled by the relationships of great women and men. What if we stopped looking at tradition as something to uphold and started viewing it as something to leave behind? We can live in traditions that were left for us or we can honor the traditions of our cities by always pushing forward through whatever foe we may meet, to our objectives to be a great place to continue living. The greatest tradition Akron and many of these cities ever had was Innovation. A new idea, or process. This is the spirit of American cities. To honor our traditions we must always move towards a goal of being better, learning and creating. This is what The Better Block is, what The Switching Gears Conference set the table for. What the walking tours and saving the N were so important along the way. The best thing about the N was to lose it, and to get it back, as something new, exciting and important.

The process of this Retrospect made the participants come to realize that their intentions for action and tangible outcomes were there all along, they just didn't outwardly know it in the planning stages. The Retrospect asked specific questions about their vision for the conference and aftermath which set the stage for the participants to learn and engage together. Intentionality is something Josh McManus preached about time and time again in his short time in Akron. We must create with intentionality to have impact on those we are to serve. AMATS
product is the transmission of people, products and ideas across the Akron Metropolitan Area and the organizations intentions from the outset of planning was to innovate and create a better product for the people that they served.

Why do we always look for champions of projects or heroes to come and save us? We come up with ideas, and we hope that someone else can implement them. It is a funny thing that we spend so much of our waking time looking for someone else to implement our ideas, to bring a fresh new perspective into our organizations when the fact is, every one of us has it in us to be a hero. We do not have to go past the mirror in the morning and wonder when the day will come that we can meet someone that inspires us to greatness. Each and every one of us were born with the ability to dig deep inside ourselves and find that man or woman that can be a leader. A great leader inspires others to lead, they do not create sheep but create more shepherds. This has been evidenced throughout this project.

One can do an infinite amount of good, if they don’t care who takes credit. – Ronald Reagan

Jason Segedy and AMATS lead and learnt by doing. It was apparent at The Switching Gears conference that Segedy was empowering his employees to take charge and have ownership of a project. To the point that Curtis Baker made the remarks from AMATS stand point and Krista Beniston organized and guided the experience. Jason stepped back and allowed his leaders to lead. This had an effect far beyond the conference when people like John and Tina Ughrin reach out. AMATS guided, made connections and stepped in when necessary to promote but it has been obvious that the ownership of Better Block is on the neighborhood, but AMATS is there always prepared to help but never over bearing. Ronald Reagan once said “one can do an infinite amount of good, if they don’t care who takes credit” If more Government organizations took this to heart and created ways for citizens to have ownership instead of feeling that there is a rigid protocol to follow if the city is going to help you our cities would rebound at an even faster rate. AMATS has been not just a thought leader, but now an action creator. Not by taking on all of the responsibility itself but by empowering people to do what they were intended to do. Lead. Every one of us has the ability to be that champion we are looking for instead of planning for places to merely exist.

In closing, every learning from this Retrospect is about people, their relationships to each other and their places. How we conduct ourselves in this space is a deeply profound task. A separate report has been provided for specific recommendation – opportunities to apply these learnings.
It is also clear from this Retrospect that relentlessly using what we know (and sometimes what we don’t know we know), searching our souls for what we need to know and what we are learning together is at the core of us as people and of us as a community and our sustained progress – and tradition.

The Knowledge Asset we have created here follows that model of living in and amongst people. This is a space to record ideas but the real model for replicability lies in continued conversations, ongoing action together, and in each other. We believe the success ahead for Akron will confirm this with a growing and very important story that will be shared.

People are why AMATS, other MPO’s, and other organizations, in general, do the work that they do…and work as they work. Never lose sight of your end goal in creating a better and better relationship between people, their places, and what they can learn from doing things together.

To that end, we close with the list of “knowledge assets” - our people from the Retrospect. This group, now expands to include members of the Akron Strike Team and North Hill. These are the resources that will join with others to build and sustain the success underway in Akron.
APPENDIX

THE RETROSPECT’S KNOWLEDGE ASSETS

CURTIS BAKER – AMATS Planning Administrator.
cbaker@akronohio.gov
Curtis walks the line between tactician and strategist. He helps craft the bigger picture while having the ability to lead the implementation arm of AMATS. Curtis played a key role in The Switching Gears planning and grant application process.

KRISTA BENISTON- Switching Gears Conference Organizer.
kbeniston@akronohio.gov
Krista has an uncanny attention to detail mentality. Her tactical knowledge of implementation can be of enormous value to any planning process. Krista leads from the front and will be the first to get her hands dirty with the people she leads.

HEATHER DAVIS-REIDL –Knowledge Manager – AMATS
hreidl@akronohio.gov
The Switching Gears Conference was Heathers first Knowledge Management Project. Her implementation of KM was one of the many factors that led to the conferences breakthrough success. Heather excels in implementing learning into organizational structures to create learning organizations.

TONY KUHEL – Managing Director of Executive Leadership – Escalys
tkuhel@escalys.com
Tony is the architect of AMATS Knowledge Management Program. He has years of experience in creating Communities of Practice and has implemented them for multiple organizations and clients. He is a subject matter expert on the creation of Learning Organizations.

KYLE KUTUCHIEF - Akron Interim Director of Knight Foundation -
kutuchief@knightfoundation.org
Kyle played an integral role of connecting the dots for The Better Block Project. His knowledge of Akron and its moving parts and pieces contributed greatly to the successes we have seen and the successes we are about to realize.
JOSH MCMANUS – Former Akron Program Director Knight Foundation – joshmcm anus@mac.com

Josh’s role was to empower citizens to stop asking for permission and start doing. He was able to put a fresh set of eyes on the problems that Akron faced and work with citizens to begin to provide solutions. He has since moved back to Detroit to continue his efforts there.

JOHN UGHRIN –
Co-Principal Smile Minded SmartWorks
jughrin@smileminded.com

John was an attendee of Switching Gears and has also been a Neighborhood Champion of The Better Block Project in North Hill. John is a strategic thinker and has an amazing grasp of how data can be utilized in community development.

TINA UGHRIN –
Co-Principal Smile Minded SmartWorks
tughrin@smileminded.com

Tina was an attendee of Switching Gears and along with her husband John has been a Neighborhood Champion of The Better Block Project in North Hill. Tina is a remarkable connector of people and an instigator of progress.

JASON SEGEDY - Executive Director, AMATS
jsegedy@akronohio.gov

Jason excels in the strategic implementation of grassroots initiatives from a government organization. He has an innate understanding of shepherding leadership and can utilize that aspect to achieve breakthrough organizational results.

RICK STOCKBURGER – Vice President of Collaboration – Escalys
rickstockburger@gmail.com

Rick was the facilitator and lead author of this Retrospect. He played various roles throughout The Switching Gears and Strike Team initiatives and has been deeply involved in revitalization efforts in Akron.