

# Civic Engagement

## Why is this important?

Levels of civic engagement are an indicator of a community's interconnectedness, of the sense of ownership felt by residents, of a city's capacity to learn and adapt to serve the community, and of levels of social capital. Social capital is the networks, relationships, communication, and trust between people that contributes to social cohesion. Increased social capital has a positive impact on reported quality of life, access to economic and social opportunities, and even mental and physical health. Identified health benefits linked to high levels of social capital include fewer illnesses, longer life, better overall health, improved cardiovascular health, faster recovery from illness and improved mental health.<sup>50</sup> High social capital has also been associated with higher educational performance, positive child development, community safety, and personal health and happiness. High commute times and social stratification have also been shown to decrease civic engagement and social capital.<sup>51</sup>

In recent years, Redwood City has focused on civic engagement as a core strategy for building community, and the City Council has adopted "Build a Great Community Together" as its core purpose. The City has sought to develop ongoing partnerships between city government, schools, businesses, community based organizations, and the individual people who live and work in the city. In addition to city-led efforts, the City has also sought to support self-organized community building efforts.

## Defining Sustainability

A sustainable level of civic engagement supports high levels of social capital and encourages participation by all residents in both formal and informal types of civic involvement.

## Indicator Results

### Catalogue of City-Sponsored Community-Building Programs

Redwood City sponsors a variety of community-building and civic engagement efforts. The indicator for levels of community-building programs is Table 28, which lists these efforts. This can be updated over time as programs change or are added.

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<sup>50</sup> Metropolitan Design Center, University of Minnesota, 2007, *Information Sheet 1: Integrating Health into Comprehensive Planning*, Version 1.0, January, page 4; and Design, Community & Environment et. al., 2006, *Understanding the Relationship Between Public Health and the Built Environment: A Report Prepared for the LEED-ND Core Committee*, page 91.

<sup>51</sup> Frumkin, H., 2002, "Urban sprawl and public health," *Public Health Reports*, May-June, Vol. 117, page 209; The negative impact of commute times on social capital is one of the major theses of Robert Putnam's influential book *Bowling Alone*.

**Table 28: Catalogue of City-Sponsored Community-Building Programs**

Program or Practice	Comments
<i>The PACT program</i>	PACT (The Partnership Academy for Community Teamwork) is a 9-week course for city residents, sponsored by the City Manager's Office. It provides an overview of how the city government works and how the city is developing, and provides tools for attendees to increase their level of civic involvement. Since inception in fall of 2002, the City has hosted 10 PACT sessions involving nearly 300 community members. City staff have observed that PACT is the first official instance of civic engagement for a majority of participants, and that many go on to be involved in higher levels of civic engagement.
<i>Neighborhood Liaison Program</i>	Neighborhood Liaisons are community members who agree and are trained to organize their neighbors around a neighborhood improvement project agreed upon by the liaison and participating members. Neighborhood liaisons also serve as a conduit for communication to and from the city, and are organized by the City Manager's office. As of July 2008, Redwood City has 51 designated Neighborhood Liaisons. Like the PACT program, city staff have observed that many Neighborhood Liaison Program participants go on to be involved in higher levels of civic engagement.
<i>Neighborhood Associations</i>	There are 11 neighborhood associations in Redwood City. Some associations are more active than others, but all are important points of contact between the city and the community.
<i>Redwood City 2020</i>	Redwood City 2020 is a long-standing collaboration of the City of Redwood City, the Redwood City Elementary School District, the Sequoia Union High School District, San Mateo County, Stanford University / John W. Gardner Center, Wells Fargo Bank, the Sequoia Healthcare District, and Kaiser Permanente. In the past it has sponsored initiatives and projects related to education, health, and civic involvement, and it is currently focused primarily on education initiatives.
<i>Community Builders Program</i>	The City Manager's office has sponsored two "Community Builders" speakers series (2005 and 2006/7) with a total of 220 participants. Participants at these events are given ideas, tools, and motivation for community-building, "asset-based development," and neighborhood organizing.
<i>Pride and Beautification Committee</i>	This volunteer committee is staffed through the City Manager's office and has existed since 1987. It undertakes initiatives to improve Redwood City's physical and aesthetic environment. Currently, these include fall and spring clean-up days, graffiti eradication, earthday activities, abandoned shopping cart removal, and the Mayor's Beautification Awards.
<i>Peninsula Conflict Resolution Center</i>	The City has an ongoing partnership with the Peninsula Conflict Resolution. To date, the city has worked with the Center to complete community engagement around 3 highly visible and contentious projects (Peninsula Park, the Costco expansion, and Woodside Villas).
<i>General Plan Process</i>	As part of its general planning process, Redwood City is encouraging participation by segments of the population that are typically less involved in civic affairs. Examples of these efforts include hosting 3 affinity groups within ESL (English as a Second Language) classes and hosting two youth focus groups in City Hall.
<i>Ongoing Outreach</i>	The City encourages participation from all its residents by locating meetings within neighborhoods affected by a given issue, providing information in English and Spanish, providing simultaneous translation at events, offering childcare, collaborating with organizations serving diverse community members and hosting meeting within existing meetings and classes.

Source: Redwood City City Manager's Office, 2008

## Participation in Parks, Recreation and Community Services Programs

Participation in recreational programs like sports teams and visits to community centers can indicate civic involvement and the development of social capital. The Redwood City's Parks, Recreation, and Community Services Department tracks visits to community and recreation centers and participation in sports teams in its Annual Report. These figures are summarized in Table 29 and are discussed in greater detail in the Department's Annual Report.

- Redwood City has 3 facilities that regularly receive 100,000 visits or more per year.
- The 4 facilities tracked have had over 350,000 visits per year combined each year since FY 2002-2003.

**Table 29: Participation in Selected Parks, Recreation, and Community Services Programs**

	FY 2002-2003	FY 2003-2004	FY 2004-2005	FY 2005-2006	FY 2006-2007
Red Morton Center Visits	104,262	104,000	131,771	128,511	139,276
Fair Oaks Community Center Visits	84,104	115,795	105,000	100,000	100,000
Vets Building Visits	139,762	138,083	154,389	152,000	100,543 <sup>32</sup>
Sandpiper Youth Club Visits	23,223	28,866	51,267	63,069	64,623
Adult Sport Teams	227	235	372	336	187
Youth Sport League Players	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	1,594

### Sense of Community – PACT Survey

Since 2005, the City has conducted four before-and-after surveys of PACT participants. The survey measures response to the question “How strong is your feeling of a sense of community in Redwood City.” The question is asked both before and after completion of the PACT course. Respondents are more likely to report strong feelings of community after completion of the PACT course.

**Table 30: PACT Survey results: Feelings of a Sense of Community in Redwood City**

	Before PACT Participation	After PACT Participation
Very/Somewhat Strong	67%	79%
Somewhat/Very Weak	33%	21%

Source: Redwood City City Manager’s Office, 2008

### Sense of Community – Neighborhood Services Survey

The City of Redwood City has periodically conducted the Neighborhood Services Survey as a means to provide feedback about perceived quality of life and satisfaction with city services by residents. Surveys were most recently conducted in 2001 and 2003. The 2003 survey specifically sought information about the sense of community in Redwood City, and results are presented below.

- The majority of respondents felt that the sense of community was either ‘Very’ or ‘Somewhat’ strong (18% and 44%, respectively); 24% felt it was ‘Somewhat weak’, 6% believed it was ‘Very weak’, and 7% felt that there was ‘None at all’.
- Based on selections offered in the survey, residents indicated that they felt the strongest sense of community from “Friends living locally,” as well as from “Family living closely,” “Local based hobbies/sports,” and “Children’s local schools.”

<sup>32</sup> Staff changes produced a significantly lower number of visits in this year.

- Many residents also suggested ideas not included as selections in the survey: 14% of respondents mentioned “City Parks and Recreation,” 11% mentioned “Neighborhood,” and 8% mentioned “Library” as sources of strength of community.

## Summary of Results

Redwood City residents benefit from a wide variety of civic and recreational opportunities, and a large percentage visit facilities or participate in programs sponsored by the Parks, Recreation and Community Services Department or the City Manager’s Office. Many residents report feeling a sense of community, particularly after participation in civic engagement programs or as the result of friend and family living nearby, participation in sports and hobbies, or other social activities.

## Potential Policy Responses

- Continue to orient city policy around the City’s adopted core purpose of “Build A Great Community Together”.
- Actively cultivate partnerships with community based organizations, educational institutions, civic groups and the business community.
- Expand opportunities for informed resident engagement, especially among historically under-represented residents.
- Continue to conduct the Neighborhood Services Survey, and maintain and expand survey questions dealing with community involvement.
- As feasible, invest in the amenities that are most reported by residents in the Neighborhood Services Survey to increase feelings of community. These include local-based hobbies and sports, local schools, city parks and recreation, neighborhood cohesion, the library, and residents living close to other family.
- Encourage participation in the PACT and Neighborhood Liaison programs, which are proven gateways to civic involvement.