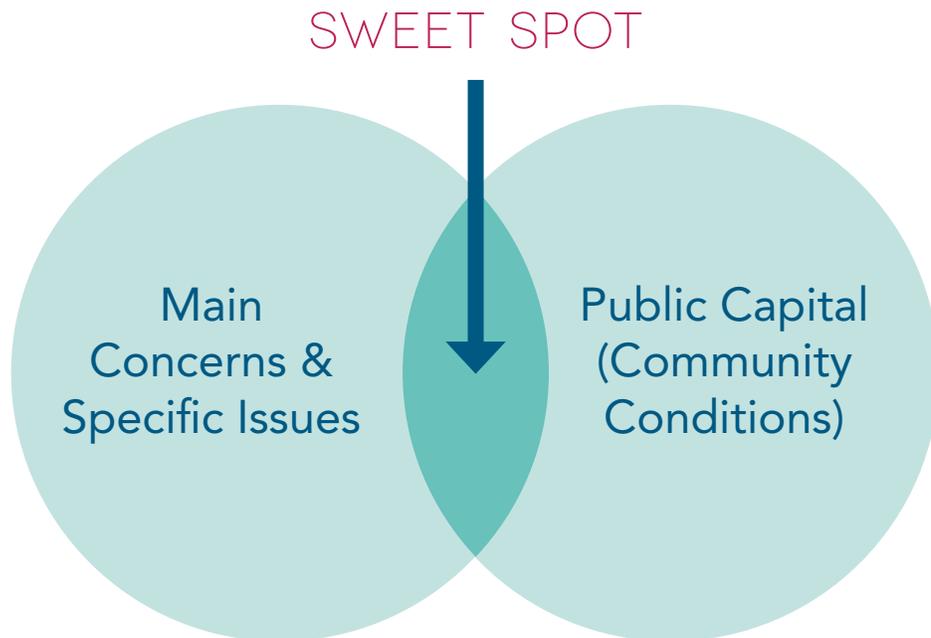


# THE SWEET SPOT OF PUBLIC LIFE

The Sweet Spot is where you take action on issues the community cares about in a way that builds the conditions for change in your community at the same time.



## NOTES

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# THE SWEET SPOT OF PUBLIC LIFE

## Public Capital: The Conditions for Change

**Working in the The Sweet Spot of Public Life** requires a focus on Public Capital—the conditions for change that enable communities to move forward. These are the factors that shape the ability and capacity of a community to work together and create change.

**An Abundance of Social Gatherings** that enable people to learn about what is happening in the community and begin to develop a sense of mutual trust.

**Organized Spaces for Interaction** where people can come together to learn about, discuss, and often act on community challenges. These spaces help a community begin to identify and tap resources to address concerns.

**Boundary-Spanning Organizations** that help engage people in public life, spur discussion on community challenges, and marshal a community's resources to move ahead. These organizations help lay the foundation for community action, but do not act as the driving force.

**Safe Havens for Decision Makers** where a community's leaders can deliberate and work through community concerns in "unofficial," candid discussions.

**Strong, Diverse Leadership** that extends to all layers of a community, understands the concerns of the community as a whole, and serves as a connector among individuals and organizations throughout the community.

**Informal Networks and Links** that connect various individuals, groups, organizations, and institutions together to create a cross-fertilization effect of experiences, knowledge, and resources. People carry and spread ideas, messages, and community norms from place to place.

**Conscious Community Discussion** where a community has ample opportunity to think about and sort through its public concerns before taking action. People play an active role in helping decide how the community should act.

**Community Norms for Public Life** that help guide how people act individually, interact, and work together. These norms set the standards and tone for civic engagement.

**A Shared Purpose for the Community** that sends an explicit message about the community's aspirations and helps reinforce that everyone is headed toward a common goal.

# THE SWEET SPOT

February 26, 2007

by Richard C. Harwood

## Finding the 'Sweet Spot'

Increasingly, as I travel the country, I find myself talking about the "sweet spot of public life"—how we can take action on specific issues and build community at the same time. This past week was no different. I spent two days with 40 leaders of local collaboratives in Newark, N.J., good people who are urgently focused on strengthening families and children.

The challenges in Newark (and Essex County) are tough, long-standing, often depressing—but doable. In these communities, people often feel that no one speaks for or listens to them. Finding sustainable pathways for improving their local conditions can be hard. People worry that they are being left behind. Truth be told, many people are falling through the cracks.

The collaboratives sit at two critical nexus points in relationship to these challenges. They work among people in neighborhoods trying to create change; and they sit between "official" city structures and the local neighborhoods and communities to ensure that all people are at the table of public discussion and decision-making. Indeed, they serve as essential connective tissue that can help to bring about a greater sense of community wholeness.

No doubt, there is compelling need for better policies and programs that address people's core concerns around families and children; but it is also the case, according to the folks in Newark and Essex County, that effective policies and programs also require the community coming together in new ways— from people supporting one another to people taking more responsibility for themselves.

Indeed, a recurring theme of the conversation in Newark was how to tap people's own potential to create change and come together to forge stronger communities. But what does this mean? How does it happen? How does it sustain itself? This is a challenge I hear everywhere I go.

We must design initiatives that not only focus on a specific issue, but that also build the relationships, leaders, networks, and norms of communities—the stuff that makes communities go—what I call "The Sweet Spot." In Newark and Essex County, there were three key components of The

Sweet Spot that need attention if the community is to effectively address its core concerns around families and children:

- **Cultivating leaders:** There is a real need to identify and engage "untapped" leaders in the community who hold authority and authenticity in the eyes of residents. These leaders can help engage, inspire, and support people and their causes in ways that leaders outside the community simply cannot.
- **Creating safe space for discussion:** There is a real need to create safe spaces in which people can come together to identify their aspirations, wrestle with competing values, and find ways to join hands in building a stronger community and strengthening families. The conversations that are now taking place too often focus on complaints and expert-framed policy issues that fail to move individuals and the community forward.
- **Building networks:** There is a real need to build networks in which organizations and leaders can learn about each other, build trust, and discover new ways (or strengthen existing ways) of working together. These networks reduce the time and costs associated with mistrust, the spinning of wheels, the pointing of fingers, and the inaction that results when we are unable to overcome obstacles.

The importance of finding The Sweet Spot cannot be over-emphasized. For it is not merely an academic point, or something simply to theorize about.

Rather, the challenge is, how can we move ahead?

Let's face it, whether in Newark or in other communities, we will never have all the resources, time, and people we want to address the challenges before us. Instead, we must find ways to leverage our resources for making progress. That, I believe, requires that we find The Sweet Spot. Then we can have the very capacities we need to act on the challenges we seek to overcome.