

# Stepping Outside the Boundary: Community-Building at Yosemite National Park

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BEFORE THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE'S (NPS'S) NOVEMBER 2003 RELEASE of *Director's Order 75A, Civic Engagement and Public Involvement (DO-75A)*, forward-thinking park managers were already finding ways to better communicate with local park constituencies and neighboring communities. This study explores the efforts of Yosemite National Park (YNP) managers to reach beyond the park boundaries and engage local publics outside of legislated mandates. It relies on three years of participant observation of community-building strategies and public meetings; 53 in-depth interviews of YNP managers, NPS executives, and local participants;<sup>1</sup> and document review.

After years of park management plans plagued by litigation, and contentious relations with local communities seemingly exacerbated by the formal public involvement process, YNP broadened attempts to engage their surrounding communities in 2003. In so doing they hoped to decrease conflict, increase communication, and build trust among the local communities.

One manager commented about these community-building efforts:

I want to go out [engage with local community members] when it's not just required [by NEPA, the National Environmental Policy Act]. So that, I get to know the people and I've talked to them and I've come to them and said, What are we doing right? What are we doing wrong? How can we improve?... so when we do have a NEPA compliance thing that we need to go and talk to them about

officially, they know who I am, they know who the staff is, they know they've given us input about how best to reach out to people in their community. (NPS N-8 15-Feb-06)

YNP's community-building strategy relied on an organizational culture that openly engaged the local publics,<sup>2</sup> including personnel assignments, workshops, and meetings. This article will introduce the concept of community-building, briefly discuss personnel assignments and workshops that promoted it, and delve deeper into the Experience Your Yosemite (EYY) and Yosemite Gateway Partners (YGP) meetings.

## **Community-building**

Community-building, for the purposes of this paper, refers to two-way communication between park management and local publics that takes place outside of a mandated planning process, with the objective of

creating transboundary networks and building relationships.<sup>3</sup> Community-building is very different from the one-way public outreach to communities characteristic of mandated planning processes, though it may take place when a planning process is underway. One positive outcome of community-building is the accumulation of social capital.<sup>4</sup>

### **Community-building strategies at YNP**

Community-building has flourished at YNP in response to the superintendent's and senior YNP managers' promotion of engagement with local publics. YNP managers did not design their community-building strategies as part of a single strategic planning exercise. Program formats were dynamic and open; the local public was encouraged to participate in setting meeting agendas, timing, and format. As the community-building strategy was being implemented, the superintendent hired new personnel with experience in engaging local publics. These YNP personnel modified, adapted, and refined community-building processes. The local publics provided feedback to YNP managers as they made changes to the community-building programs. Perceptions of local publics were taken into consideration when the superintendent selected at least one new senior YNP manager whose experience greatly affected community-building.<sup>5</sup>

All the community-building strategies employed by YNP include opportunities for direct question-and-answer time with YNP personnel. Additionally, these strategies are undertaken outside of NEPA planning processes, which allows transboundary networks to be created between YNP personnel and community members before a decision-making process or conflict

begins. What follows are highlights of the YNP community-building program:

- **Public involvement and outreach branch.** This branch consists of a chief and three other YNP personnel who organize and conduct all YNP's community-building and NEPA public involvement efforts.
- **Community liaison.** The liaison reports directly to the superintendent and acts as a conduit to local community members. The liaison's interactions with local community members take place almost exclusively outside park boundaries.
- **Monthly planning open houses.** These meetings are open to the public and provide up-to-date park planning and management information, as well as schedules for on-going and future construction projects. Copies of all YNP approved and draft planning documents are available. YNP management personnel answer questions from the public at these meetings.
- **"Balancing Nature and Commerce in Yosemite Gateway Communities" workshop.** This three-day workshop, held in the park, was co-funded by local communities, NPS, YNP non-profit partners, and the park concessionaire.<sup>6</sup> At this workshop, local community members and YNP personnel learned about the socioeconomic realities of rural communities dependent upon natural resources and strategies for capitalizing on the communities' attributes and economic potential. Community participants and YNP personnel formed teams arranged by access corridor, and participated in sessions on: mapping your communi-

ty; creating a socioeconomic profile; sustainable tourism; developing a community vision; measuring the impacts of growth and development; building civic engagement; building long-term partnerships; and land conservation tools, strategies and case studies.

- **“Planning 101” workshops.** A series of workshops was conducted in surrounding communities in late 2005 to solicit feedback from community members and inform participants of the NPS’s federally mandated planning processes.
- **YNP employees living in local communities.** YNP personnel began living in local communities as the park was locating administrative functions outside park boundaries in a NPS administrative area. YNP personnel who live in local communities report that interactions with local community members have provided deep friendships, respect, and a sense of community.
- **YNP employees joining local civic associations.** YNP personal who live in local communities have been encouraged to participate in a variety of civic organizations, including 4H, Rotary, and the Mariposa/Yosemite Forum. Civic associations are cited consistently in the literature as a way to build and maintain social capital (Putnam 2000; Bankston and Zhou 2002; Thomas 2003). What follows are comments by a senior YNP manager describing his experiences with belonging to local civic organizations:

... [The] big thing about the 4H is it was not unlike the other entities [civic organizations] where I became friends with, and mutually

respected, a whole different group of people. You know, this was the ranchers and farmers and the cowboys. And we made a lot—and I made a lot of friends.... I found that almost immediately after I was in Rotary four or five months that, that someone would inevitably call me and say, “Is this true? I heard this....” (NPS N-6 25-Jan-06)

YNP personnel have also participated in the Mariposa/Yosemite Forum since 2000. The forum is an informal meeting between community members and YNP senior personnel.

- **Experience Your Yosemite.** This is a monthly behind-the-scenes tour of the park for local community leaders, defined in more detail below.
- **Yosemite Gateway Partners meetings.** These quarterly meetings allow local community leaders and park managers to discuss subjects important to the park and communities, and are also described in more detail below.

### Experience Your Yosemite

They invite busloads of community groups into the park and give us a back scene view of what goes on at National Park ... like if you go to Disneyland and get the underground tour! (Local resident C-23 08-Mar-06)

Experience Your Yosemite (EYY) is an invitation-only event held in Yosemite Valley once a month between March and October where YNP managers invite leaders from surrounding communities to participate in a day-long, behind-the-scenes look at park operations (Figure 1). This program was adapted from the Experience

Your Smokies program and was created at YNP after the superintendent hired the chief of interpretation from Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The program was designed to introduce community leaders to YNP senior personnel and provide opportunities for authentic dialogue in an attempt to dispel rumors in the community and reduce negative feelings toward park management by the local public.

EYY is structured as a field trip, combined with an extended question-and-answer session with the superintendent. The program is hosted at the Ahwahnee Hotel, and a four-course lunch and continental breakfast are included. YNP relies on donations of in-kind services and funds to accommodate the meeting format.<sup>7</sup> At its inception, YNP personnel invited participants from a single local community to attend EYY as a group. However, participant feedback and the realities of scheduling quickly led YNP to invite community leaders from multiple communities to attend EYY meetings. In the early meetings the superintendent would give a PowerPoint presentation followed by a question-and-answer period. YNP personnel discovered that the questions asked by the participants usually covered all the major points addressed in the presentation and provided a more interactive format for participants to engage the superintendent. Based on participant feedback and these observations, YNP personnel discarded the PowerPoint presentation to emphasize a question-and-answer format.

Community members typically attend EYY once. Participants ride one of YNP's hybrid electric-diesel buses<sup>8</sup> as park personnel provide lectures and hands-on activ-



Figure 1. Local community members on an informational tour through Yosemite Valley as part of an Experience Your Yosemite Program. Photo by Christopher C. Lever.

ities. Participants in different EYY sessions have learned about bear management, hydrology, wildfire management, archeology, park architecture, botany, meadow restoration, prescribed fire, park plans, Yosemite Valley history, non-profit park partners, and recycling. This program provides participants with specific communication channels to senior park managers; participants meet all the division chiefs, the superintendent, and the deputy superintendent as well as the entire Public Involvement and Outreach Branch. In the words of a YNP senior manager:

[EYY] is another avenue of giving folks the chance to hear from the superintendent and the management team, to have a warm reception with park service staff, to experience a wonderful day in Yosemite National Park, have a killer lunch, one of a kind at the Ahwahnee Hotel... [C]ombine that with the atmosphere of Yosemite and what Yosemite is and then if there was a barrier, a preconceived barrier or one that was put up through time for whatever rea-

son—disagreements with the park in our planning. If they show up to a situation like that most people are going to put down those barriers. It's going to start breaking down. Where they're having one-on-one contact and dialogue and interaction and having their questions asked and answered on [the] spot, by a division chief or manager who can answer their question. (NPS N-4 16-Apr-06)

The EYY program has proven an excellent forum for introducing non-traditional and under-represented groups to YNP and park managers. This opens trans-boundary networks with individuals who were previously not visitors to the park.

As of June 2007, 648 individuals from 13 counties in California and Nevada have attended EYY. The following is an excellent example of both the power of authentic dialogue and the importance of YNP personnel participating in local civic organizations. This quote is from a YNP senior manager and Rotarian who describes an exchange between a community member and senior park manager at the first EYY meeting that dispelled a longstanding rumor:

And the best example I can give you was with two people in my Rotary that grew up in Yosemite Valley ... and they hate park management. We brought them into the very first [EYY], and they get a chance to sit down with the superintendent, and [senior park managers] and they start hammering these guys with questions. "How come you do this? How come you do that?" ... Jim Simpson,<sup>9</sup> ...

said, "You want to tell me why you imported granite from out of state for that wall along Highway 140, when we've got granite quarries right here within five miles of the boundary." And the deputy superintendent, kind of pulled up so he could sit down more comfortably next to him and said, "Well you know, I heard that too and I don't know where that story came from... You know, that's not granite at all, that's concrete that's formed to look like granite, and the reason we did it is because it was the cheapest way to go, and they say that it's going to last at least as long as the granite would have." Well, here's Jim, I mean he's deflated, and the deputy superintendent was really nice about it, and he understood somehow this bad information just was out there, and we [YNP] don't know why or how it got out there... Anyway, that's the best thing that came out of the first Experience Your Yosemite. And then when I came back to Rotary, Jim said, well I guess they sure set me straight. And I said, "Well, were you crooked?" [A]nd he's a realtor, so everybody laughed and he and I are pretty much buddies.<sup>10</sup> (NPS N-7 8-Feb-06)

### **Yosemite Gateway Partners meetings**

The gateway partner meeting grew out of the frustration of all the negative conversations that were out in the community and an attempt to improve communications. (NPS N-11 31-Jan-06)

Yosemite Gateway Partners (YGP) meetings are also by invitation, with the opportunity for participants to invite others, and are held quarterly in the park. At these meetings, local community leaders (including government representatives) and senior park personnel participate in a continuing dialogue that focuses on issues of concern to all participants. Most community participants have attended numerous meetings, and some have attended every meeting. This program meets in the Mountain Room of the Lodge at Yosemite Falls in Yosemite Valley and lasts from 10:00 AM until 2:00 PM (Figure 2). The morning is devoted to YNP updates and a question-and-answer session with the superintendent; during the provided lunch and afternoon, the agenda is devoted to local public concerns.

YNP managers set the stage for who attends YGP meetings with their invitations to the first meeting.<sup>11</sup> The majority of community participants are local business owners, chamber of commerce members, and others from tourism-related fields; also in attendance are county supervisors whose districts include the park, legislative liaisons for national congressmen and senators, retirees, environmentalists, and representatives of non-profit organizations. Current

participants may invite others to attend YGP meetings, and this is the predominant way that participation has expanded. The community participants seem to focus on how the park and communities can work together to maintain or increase the economic prosperity of the local communities during the lunch and afternoon sessions.

YGP meetings were not designed as a replacement for NEPA public involvement. Park managers are not soliciting “group advice” or attempting to re-write or amend park plans in this forum. This allows the park to meet with these communities without fear of triggering Federal Advisory Committee Act<sup>12</sup> provisions or conflicting with YNP’s legislated resource protection role. Current litigants against the park have not been invited by YNP to these meetings, and if they attended would probably be disappointed by the lack of community interest in the formal planning process.

The original goals for YGP meetings were quite modest: open communication channels, reduce negative images, dispel rumors, and provide facts outside of a specific planning process. The agenda included an update on current and upcoming park construction projects and plans, a question-and-answer session with the superintendent

and senior park managers, and introducing attendees and senior park personnel to each other. All agenda items, whether from YNP personnel or recommended by community members, were approved by the superintendent. At the time of the interviews for this study in 2006, the goals for YGP had evolved well beyond the initial aspirations for the meetings. A senior YNP manager describes them:

Figure 2. Local community leaders and senior Yosemite National Park staff at a Yosemite Gateway Partners meeting. Photo by Miguel A. Maldonado.



To work with our neighbors on regional issues, to look after each other's health and well-being because of our mutual interest, and to capitalize on our common efforts, and to have a forum to share information, and to have a forum to air differences and begin to work on resolutions to those where it would help us to have some kind of resolution. (NPS N-5 30-Jan-06)

The bulk of community participants in YGP are in business or tourism, which may account for the economic goals they perceived the meetings to serve:

... bringing people together from the different gateway communities to find common interests, ways to work together to bring tourism to the area. (Local Resident C-37 1-Mar-06)

However, other community participants envisioned a reciprocal relationship mutually beneficial to all participants:

I think communication has been a vital part of what the intention was, to see how we could help the park and how the park could help us. (Local Resident C-30 21-Feb-06)

Park personnel intended to hold YGP meetings twice a year. However, after the first meeting the participants asked that the meetings be scheduled at least quarterly and the park agreed. Between October 2003 and January 2008 the park hosted 15 YGP meetings. Attendance has remained high, with most meetings drawing over 40 people. YGP participants have noticed a

change in attitudes since the inception of the meetings. Local community members responded to YNP managers' outreach, and even individuals with a history of tension with park managers participated earnestly in the process:

People who are really opposed to the park service are at those [YGP] meetings, there used to be no communication until [the new superintendent] came aboard.... [T]hey're not, they're not as verbal at the [public] meetings and as angry at the [public] meetings like they once were. So there's a big difference. (Local Resident C-28 10-Feb-06)

And:

That tension, that conspiratorial tension that was here three years ago seems to be breaking down. Yes, we still have those people in our community who want to see the walls stay up, but I think those people are going to be shouted down by those who are more positive. (Local Resident C-3 9-Feb-06)

The original goal of increased communication and clarification of park goals was successful. Participants even began to express trust in YNP managers:

I personally have developed a much higher level of trust with the current park administration. (Local Resident C-24 28-Feb-06)

And:

You know, with dialogue you eventually learn to develop that trust

and that's certainly been the case here. (Local Resident C-26 20-Feb-06)

YNP shifted its role from being the "leader" to that of being one "partner" among many. However, YNP remains the lead partner in these meetings, as it sets the meeting agenda, albeit relying on input from community participants. The local community participants would be hard-pressed to host the meeting in its current format. YNP has the resources to plan, organize, and administer the YGP meeting—and through the parks' partners, to provide facilities, continental breakfast, and lunch. YNP personnel have asked numerous times if community members would like to host a YGP meeting, community members have expressed interest, but have never committed to hosting the meeting.

Today, about 50% of the meeting time is devoted to collaboration and networking, with park updates and the question-and-answer period with senior park personnel making up the rest. Guest speakers, including academics, have presented on demographic trends, regional marketing, and video communication. The park's Public Involvement and Outreach Branch publishes a YGP quarterly newsletter that is mailed to all participants. After the YGP took a collaborative turn, the participants began to learn from each other, work together on projects, and challenge the status quo, benefiting the region as a whole.

The YGP meetings have been successful in dispelling rumors, providing facts, and creating transboundary networks between YNP managers and community participants. The access to YNP management that YGP participants gain by attending meetings can be measured in social net-

works and shared information. YGP participants have direct knowledge of, and personal contact information for, senior YNP personnel; they have met these individuals and formed relationships. They have gained shared knowledge as they explored community concerns and potential solutions. Just as important are the relationships that YGP community participants have formed with other community members from different access corridors. YNP managers better understand community concerns as a result of YGP meetings.

Specific accomplishments of the YGP meetings include:

- **Regional marketing collaborative.** A five-page advertisement featuring all four access corridors to the park, as well as the park's concessionaire, was designed collaboratively by local community members through the YGP Marketing Committee, and placed in the California state tourism guide. This was the first time that local communities had jointly advertised their region at this scale. This collaboration was a drastic departure from local communities advertising their individual access corridor while implying that no others existed.
- **Yosemite Partners Advance Entrance Pass.** This was an idea promoted by YGP participants and designed in collaboration with the park: a YNP pass, single-use or annual, that local businesses could purchase and then either sell to their customers at face value, or give to their guests as part of a promotional package. The single-day pass has a space for local businesses to insert their advertising logo.
- **YGP Intranet website.** This is a web-



site developed and maintained by YGP local community members that is accessible only to YGP participants. The site is used as an information source and calendar for the members. Participants may post events or information for all to share. Funding and maintenance for this site is provided through YGP participant donations and volunteering.

- **Applying collaborative processes in other settings.** YGP participants from the town of Groveland are using a collaborative process to develop a community vision:

[The YGP meetings] spawned an organization we've since put together called the Northern Yosemite Corridor Partners, Inc., and its mission is essentially to fulfill the visions of the community in a collaborative way. (Local Resident C-8 07-Mar-06)

- **Networking.** YGP attendees' network connections facilitated trust in a rural health care project analysis:

It turns out one of the gateway participants is Sierra Vallejos,<sup>13</sup> and she happened to be associated with the hospital, and she came along and, by virtue of our relationship, any and all uncertainty about what we were trying to do fell, because she essentially vouched for us, vouched for me. (Local Resident C 4 09-Feb-06)

### **Lingering negative feelings toward the park**

The community-building efforts of

YNP have been for the most part positively received. However, there is still a level of mistrust and negativity in the local communities surrounding YNP. Years of anger at an insular park management culture, senior personnel transfers, and a stultified planning process are hard to overcome.

In December 2005, YNP conducted "Planning 101" workshops in local communities to solicit feedback from community members on what YNP has "done right in the past and what they could do better in the future" and inform participants of the federally mandated planning processes the NPS follows. These meetings were held two years after the establishment of community-building programs such as EYY and YGP, and the completion of the "Balancing Nature and Commerce in Yosemite Gateway Communities" workshop.

The community members' responses at these workshops offer insight into how local communities are responding to YNP's community-building efforts. When participants were asked "What works well?", they cited achievements directly related to the current community-building strategy, including the establishment of: good relationships between the superintendent and public; the EYY; an open dialogue; an openness towards interaction; a receptive, congenial staff; an approach that has brought gateway communities together; and a park administration that appears to be listening and receptive to input.

The meetings also yielded an overwhelming number of "What needs improvement?" comments, reflected in such comments as: "overcome history of less-than-inclusive planning," "recognize distrust and apathy due to past experiences," "need ability to be involved throughout," "YNP players need to be consistent," "hon-

esty,” “power imbalances,” “better incorporation of comments into plans,” “connectivity between park and gateways—needs understanding and respect of differences,” “cooperation,” “credibility,” “park not listening—hearing but not listening,” “parent-child attitude by NPS—government knows best,” “a predetermined agenda—public doesn’t have meaningful choices,” “need to be creative instead of doing things the same way,” and “respect and dialogue.”<sup>14</sup>

The YGP and the “Balancing Nature and Commerce in Yosemite Gateway Communities” workshop were not mentioned, and EYY was mentioned in only one of the four “Planning 101” workshops. This situation reflects the difficulty that YNP personnel face as they attempt to overcome the history of negative feelings in local communities and the adversarial public involvement traditionally practiced by the park. Community members who have attended EYY, YGP, and the “Balancing Nature and Commerce in Yosemite Gateway Communities” workshop attended the “Planning 101” workshops; why did they not speak up on behalf of YNP’s community-building efforts? The answer is, they did, but without mentioning the programs specifically.

## Summary

I’m pretty well convinced that there’s enough momentum now, people who think positively about our region, that they will usurp those who have chosen to take a negative path. (Local Resident C-4 09-Feb-06)

Community-building at YNP has emerged through a combination of the many strategies utilized by the park. It is

worth noting that DO-75A did not exist at the beginning of this process, and even after its release in November 2003 was not cited by YNP managers as a blueprint for community-building.<sup>15</sup>

The community liaison and YNP personnel living in local communities and actively participating in civic organizations provide continual opportunities for interaction outside the parks boundaries. The Public Outreach and Involvement Branch oversee and coordinate all community-building; this ensures consistency in performance and provides a central point of contact for local publics. The monthly planning open houses provide a forum in which YNP can provide up-to-date information on projects and planning to individuals interested in coming to Yosemite Valley. EYY provides YNP with an experiential and informative format for introducing community leaders to the behind-the-scenes operations of the park. This format is particularly useful in introducing non-traditional and first-time park visitors to the park. YGP provides a forum for a continuing dialogue between community leaders and senior park managers and the opportunity to collaboratively approach community and park concerns. All these strategies incorporate opportunities for authentic dialogue and the creation of transboundary networks and social capital.

Community-building strategies are positively affecting community-park relationships. It appears that YNP has been able to allay many community members’ feelings of mistrust and negative attitudes toward the park by simply providing forums for dialogue, without any guarantees that these conversations will result in changes in YNP policy or actions. Building transboundary networks and creating social capital

were the first steps in strengthening relationships between YNP and the local publics that provide access to the park. The community-building in place at YNP offers a positive example of how other land managers can become better neighbors with their local publics. However, not all community members have been satisfied with this form of involvement. Entrenched negative attitudes toward park management decisions will be difficult to overcome, and in the end some community members probably never will trust park managers.

If YNP managers continue to foster

authentic dialogue and genuinely and openly engage local community members, the social capital and transboundary networks they have developed will pay additional dividends over the long term. These dividends may potentially include: individuals who have participated in YNP community-building taking an active role in the park planning process and NEPA-mandated public participation; more effective planning on the part of YNP because they better understand their organizational environment; and less litigation against park plans by local publics.

### **Acknowledgments**

This study would not have been possible without the cooperation and generosity of current and former YNP personnel, community informants from the Yosemite region, and executives of the National Park Service.

### **Endnotes**

1. Interview informants for this study were granted anonymity to ensure validity of responses; NPS informants are identified as (NPS N-# date of interview) and local community informants are identified as (Local Resident C-# date of interview). This research was conducted under NPS Scientific Research and Collecting Permit no. YOSE-2006-SCI-0010.
2. The shift by YNP from a typical NPS insular management focus to one that openly engaged the parks local publics is significant. This subject is covered in Lever 2007.
3. YNP managers do not use the term “community-building.” They refer to this process as “reaching out,” “building trust,” or “collaborating.”
4. Fukuyama defined “social capital” as “a set of informal values or norms shared among members of a group that permits cooperation among them” (Bankston and Zhou 2002: 287). Social capital arises over time as individuals participate in community affairs, develop norms of reciprocity, and trust one another to follow through on commitments (Thomas 2003:47).
5. A facilitator for the “Balancing Nature and Commerce in Yosemite Gateway Communities” workshop who received positive community feedback was hired as the new YNP chief of planning.
6. The Yosemite Fund, Delaware North Corporation, Mariposa County, Sierra Business Council, Sonora Area Foundation, Pacific Gas and Electric Company, Madera County Economic Development Commission, Yosemite Sierra Visitors Bureau, Mammoth Mountain Ski Area, Groveland Community Services District, and the NPS all provided funding to support this workshop, which cost \$50,000.

7. The Yosemite Fund and National Parks Foundation provide funding for EYY, and Delaware North Corporation provides funding, facilities, and in-kind services.
8. Delaware North Corporation donates the use of the bus and driver.
9. Pseudonym to protect identity.
10. The senior author witnessed this conversation at the first EYY, and the deputy superintendent went on to describe YNP's attempts to educate the public during the road construction about the use of concrete retaining walls formed to resemble granite walls. YNP took a sample wall to local communities on a flatbed truck to advertise its use. This example illustrates the difficulty YNP faces with rumors in the community: even after YNP attempted to communicate the details of the concrete wall's construction, a rumor was formed and perpetuated.
11. The invitation list was compiled from contacts made by the community liaison and other YNP managers.
12. P.L. 92-463, October 6, 1972, 86 Stat. 770, as amended. In general, any panel, conference, or similar group established or utilized by a federal agency for the purpose of obtaining consensus advice or recommendations on issues or policies will likely fall within the purview of the act.
13. Pseudonym to protect identity.
14. Meeting notes for all "Planning 101" workshops were e-mailed to all participants by the Public Involvement and Outreach Branch chief.
15. In formal interviews with 11 YNP managers and countless informal interviews with NPS personnel, only the existence of DO-75A was mentioned; it was never cited as a reference for creating or maintaining community-building programs.

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