Power Mapping 101: How Communities Can Make Connections and Improve Park Access

SAFE ROUTES TO PARKS
ACTIVATING COMMUNITIES

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Safe Routes PARTNERSHIP

A Community Power Map is a visual tool to help you identify individuals, organizations, or institutions that may influence the outcome of the positive changes to increase park access in your community. With Safe Routes to Parks, change looks like improving conditions for people to walk or bike safely to their local park or green space. This might involve a single project like adding a safe crossing or slowing down vehicles on a busy street near a local park, or more significant changes to a city's policies or processes to make these safety improvements a regular occurrence. No matter how big or small, making community conditions different from what they are almost always requires engaging various stakeholders who may hold different positions on those proposed changes.

Why Create a Community Power Map?

Creating a Community Power Map guides us to consider how and who influences projects to get implemented and what it might take to move people to action. It can help you visualize who to contact, who you need to know, and who you may need to get on your side to implement those improvements. These individuals or entities might include formal decision-makers or elected officials, community organizations, businesses, residents, or local government agencies.

Developing a Community Power Map can also be important as you work with others in your community in a coalition or with community members impacted by the issue area to create a strategy to engage multiple stakeholders in your efforts. It also can be a tool to educate and empower community members who may be new to working to advance these types of changes.

How Do We Define Power?

Put simply, power is the ability to influence a particular outcome. We each wield individual levels of influence or power that can be as basic as the daily choices we make for ourselves or our families. However, as we work towards community-level changes, the networks of influence become more dynamic as we identify people who can influence or be influenced by others toward a certain outcome.

When we think about power, what often comes to our attention is how exercising power can lead to decisions or outcomes that cause harm where only some benefit to the detriment of others. However, this is not the only way that power can be exercised, and anyone can use power to drive positive change. In Safe Routes to Parks, when power or influence is shifted to community members most impacted by the conditions we hope to change, we see how this leads to projects that are more creative and responsive to community needs and desires.

Photo: Cultiva La Salud

Preparing to Create Your Community Power Map

1. **Be clear on what the community hopes to achieve.** Identify what specific goals the community may have to improve park access. You may use tools like a Safe Routes to Park Walk Audit or other community engagement or visioning activities to identify the priorities, needs, and desires of community members. Also, the more specific the goals are, the easier it is to define key decision-makers and stakeholders to be involved.

2. **Identify who should participate in the mapping exercise.** Involve community members and people most familiar with the specific park access issues. Creating a power map together with families who lack access to park spaces, people with limited mobility, and others most impacted by the issue at hand can illuminate important dynamics in the community as well as position them to build new relationships to advance other positive changes in their community. You may also involve allies and partners with insight into local community relationships and/or groups who have successfully advanced similar changes.

3. **Begin to identify who might be key decision-makers (either a person or institution) and do a little research on them.** You may need to answer important questions about what they might be interested in, their track record on an issue, who may be part of their social networks, and who influences them both professionally and personally. Doing a little of this homework before the mapping exercise can be helpful.

4. **Set a meeting time and place to create the Community Power Map.** Creating a Community Power Map can be developed with community members and partners. Just like with any engagement activity, consider who to invite and how to create an inclusive meeting that allows for full participation. Considerations might include setting a time and place that is convenient for community members, providing language translation, and/or providing childcare. (You can get more ideas and tips from this Community Engagement Checklist.)

WHAT DOES A COMMUNITY POWER MAP LOOK LIKE?

In the Community Power Map shown here (Figure 1), a community group would like to add improvements to slow down traffic and improve safety for people walking to parks, local businesses, and schools on their local Main Street. They have started to identify a number of different entities and individuals who may impact the ability of their project to advance. As they brainstorm different stakeholders, they place them on a grid to indicate their ability to influence their project (Most Influential to Least Influential) and their level of support (Strongly Oppose to Strong Support). For instance, they identified the state Department of Transportation and the local chamber of commerce, who they perceive as having a great influence over the outcome of this project and are either neutral or not supportive of these types of improvements. Other individuals or entities they identified, like the local school and a coffee shop on Main Street, are supportive but may have a less direct influence on implementing improvements themselves. Though they may have influence over stakeholders who can.

Identifying these community dynamics is an initial step to start planning the best ways to engage each of these individuals or organizations. For instance, you might be intentional and include people who are neutral or somewhat opposed early on in project development to cultivate goodwill and address any doubts or concerns they might have sooner rather than leave them feeling excluded and resulting in backlash later on.
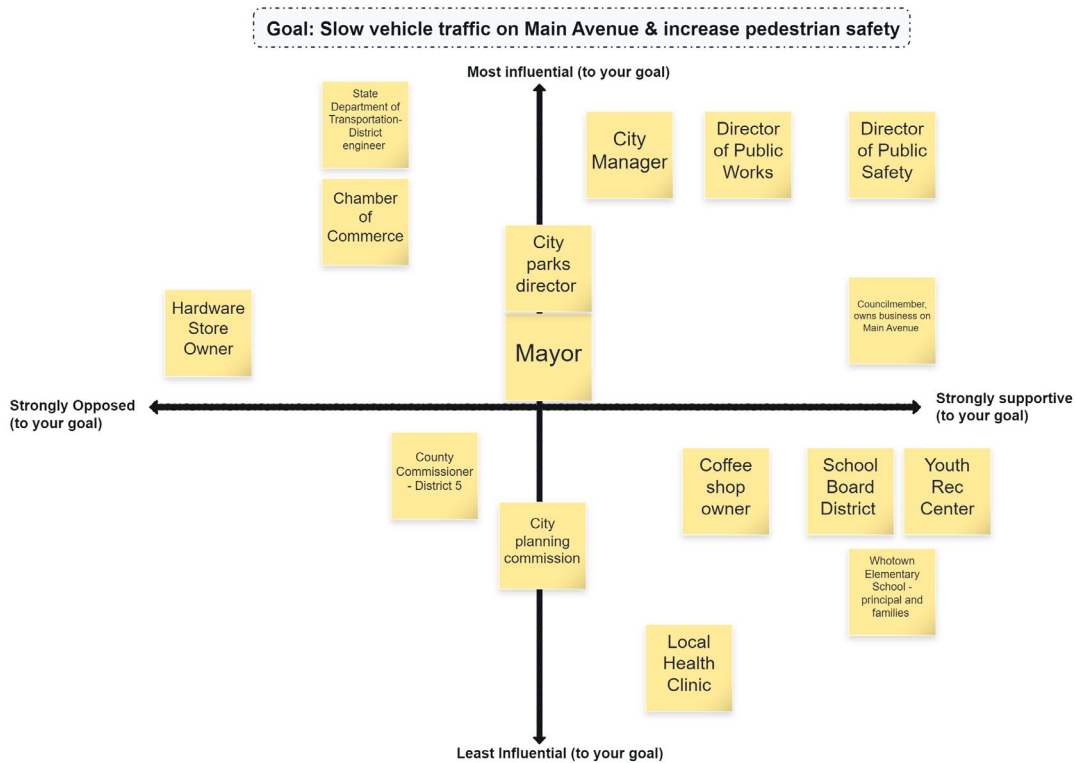

Goal: Slow vehicle traffic on Main Avenue & increase pedestrian safety

Most influential (to your goal)

State Department of Transportation- District engineer

Chamber of Commerce

City Manager

Director of Public Works

Director of Public Safety

City parks director

Mayor

Hardware Store Owner

Councilmember, owns business on Main Avenue

Strongly Opposed (to your goal) ← → Strongly supportive (to your goal)

County Commissioner - District 5

City planning commission

Coffee shop owner

School Board District

Youth Rec Center

Whotown Elementary School - principal and families

Local Health Clinic

Least Influential (to your goal)

Figure 1: Example of a community power map

Facilitating a Community Power Mapping Activity

After finishing the preliminary steps of setting your community's Safe Routes to Parks goal or project, it's time to gather with your coalition, community members, and/or core steering committee to conduct the Community Power Mapping Activity. This activity should take approximately 60-90 minutes to complete, and you will need a few basic supplies to help with brainstorming and group discussion.

Supplies:

- A Large whiteboard, wall, or poster paper (Miro or Google Jamboard for a virtual meeting)
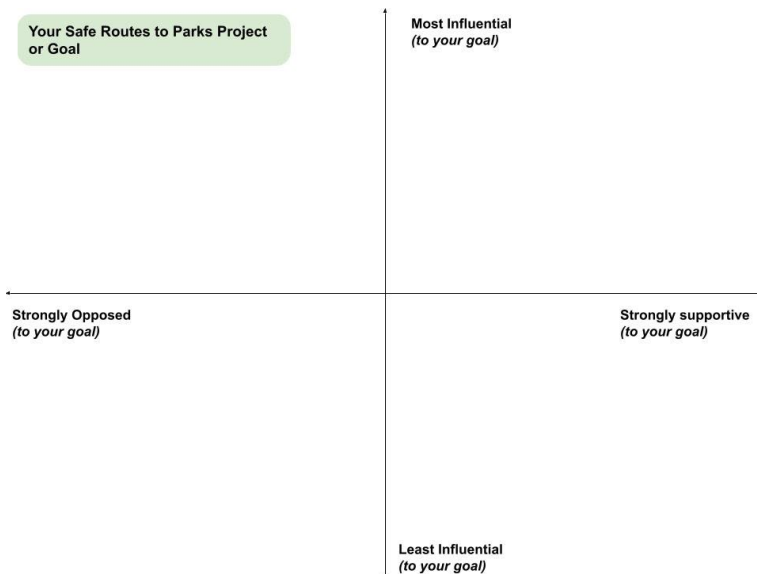- Markers
- Post-It Notes (optional)

Figure 2: Community Power Map Diagram

HOW TO CREATE YOUR COMMUNITY POWER MAP

1. **Identify all the individuals or organizations that can influence the outcome of your project.**

   Ask the group to brainstorm names of people or groups that can influence the outcome of your specific goal. These might include formal decision-makers, elected officials, local agencies, individual agency staff, or even groups not necessarily affiliated with a certain organization (i.e. parents, children, elders.) If indicating a person, name that person and their role (ex. Joe Smith, Ward 3 Council person). Have individuals write each name or group onto a single Post-It note or create a brainstorm list on a poster sheet.

2. **Position each individual or organization on your Community Power Map**

   a. Draw a large diagram like the example in Figure 2 or use this Community Power Map template to get started. Label the horizontal axis according to how supportive stakeholders are of your goal. Label the vertical axis as to how much influence they have on the outcome of your goal.

   b. Discuss each group/person from the initial brainstorm, and identify their level of influence over your project and how supportive they are to your goal. Place their Post-It note on the appropriate spot on the grid. This portion of the exercise should elicit a lot of discussion and draw on knowledge from the people participating. It is less important to get the position of each person or entity "correct." Rather, the focus is on relative positions to each other.

3. **Identify relationships between individuals or organizations.**

   Have the group look at the power map and where individuals or organizations have been placed. Identify nodes or links to show any type of connections between them. For instance, an individual or organization may not have direct influence over the outcome of the project, but they may have influence on an organization or entity that does. Similarly, identifying clusters of

organizations or individuals on your map can lend insight into your engagement efforts.

4. **Analyze your Community Power Map**

Have the group reflect on the following questions to guide your next steps toward reaching your goal.

- Which people or groups influence the decision-maker and support your issue? How can you involve them in your Safe Routes to Parks work?

- For key-decision makers, what is holding them back from adopting our ask or supporting our project?

- For those groups or individuals where you have no direct relationship and who may be important to your project, how will you connect with them?

- Are there people or groups who are influential, who you should recruit as allies?

- Are there some people or groups who are not of great relevance to your initiative (low in power, neutral position on your issue, and not well connected to other stakeholders)?

- Are there two or three obvious spots on the map where your engagement may have the greatest impact?

5. **Identify Your Next Steps**

Use this Community Power Map to determine your actions for engaging with others in your community. Some of your next steps might include:

- Assigning people to engage with and set up meetings with specific individuals or entities

- Planning engagement activities or events and inviting key decision-makers

- Consulting with others who can lend additional insight into who might be missing from your Community Power Map

- Revisiting the diagram periodically as you plan your community engagement activities to ensure that your engagement efforts are reaching key decision-makers
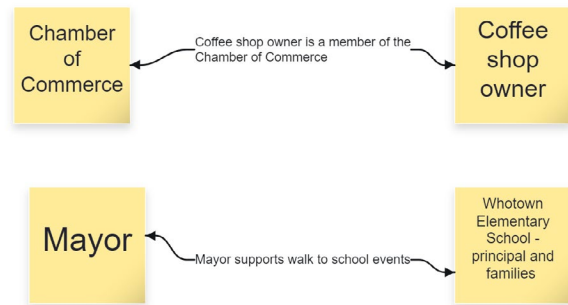

Figure 3: After identifying their place on the power map diagram, draw, and note any relationships between entities. This example is based on the community power map in Figure 1.

Conclusion

Creating a community power map is a useful way to identify individuals and organizations in your community who may influence the outcome of your Safe Routes to Parks project or goals. Community members have the power to create positive changes in their community and are better poised to do so when they have insight into the relationships and dynamics of stakeholders that may influence the outcome of a project or plan.

REFERENCES

1. Boyles, Michael. "Power Mapping: What It Is & How to Use It." Harvard Business School Online, July 7, 2022. https://online.hbs.edu/blog/post/power-mapping-what-it-is-and-how-to-use-it

2. Tang, Anita. "Power Mapping and Analysis." The Commons Social Change Library. Accessed August 1, 2023. https://commonslibrary.org/guide-power-mapping-and-analysis/