

2017 Russian Jack Community Impact Measurement: Survey Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Policies and programs intended to create change within communities, even positive change, are often initiated with limited information regarding the residents' attitudes and perceptions of need. This report is an attempt to correct that trend, gathering and presenting data that can inform future policies and programs relevant to the studied community.

In 2017, NeighborWorks Alaska (NWAK) participated in a NeighborWorks America (NWA) nationwide initiative in which network organizations are tasked with collecting community information for specific focus areas within their service area. The Community Impact Measurement (CIM) survey tracks neighborhood conditions including community engagement, resident satisfaction, service delivery quality, and perceptions of safety.

NWAK surveyed a Study Area in east Anchorage, AK, within the northern half of the Russian Jack community council district. As part of the same initiative, NWAK had previously surveyed the Study Area in 2013 allowing for direct comparison and trend observations.

The purpose of this project is to provide a snapshot of community quality and to track the efficacy of past interventions. As such, the project offers two clear benefits. First, the resulting data is a tool that will inform city leaders regarding the conditions and needs within the Study Area. The replication of the survey allows for comparison over time. Second, the project fosters improved partnerships with residents and relevant organizations. By being physically present in the community, NWAK established itself as a relevant agency for services, one willing to engage with and listen to residents. NWAK built new relationships with the Russian Jack Community Council and St. Anthony Catholic Church, building upon existing community bonds such as ongoing Williwaw Elementary engagement efforts.

Summary Findings

Over the course of a month, NWAK employees and volunteers received 213 responses to the CIM survey. Compared to 2013, resident perceptions of the community showed a slight but consistent decline. Residents were less satisfied with the community, less likely to recommend the community, felt less safe walking in the community, and were more pessimistic regarding the future of the community. Residents also perceived children and elderly in the community as significantly less safe. Despite increases in police officers, resident perception of the police declined. Residents were also critical of the quality of the snow removal, though the heavier snowfall of 2016-2017 may be a factor

Several residents (18.8%) indicated an awareness that the ongoing local and statewide recession, now in its second year, is a factor regarding service quality and the future of the neighborhood. Some Alaskan economists have predicted that no recovery can be expected until 2026. In 2017, Anchorage Mayor Ethan Berkowitz went so far as to declare that increases in the police force

necessitated cuts in snow removal, a “consequence of not having adequate revenue to handle our responsibilities.”

Despite, or due to, declining perspectives of their community, residents indicated an increased interest in volunteering and belief in their abilities to affect change. Nearly 87% of residents indicated at least some willingness to volunteer in the community. Residents also increasingly believed that they could make a great difference within their community. However, this stated willingness was not matched by actual volunteering within the community. Only 39.3% of respondents indicated that they had volunteered within the community within the past year. Anecdotally, many surveyed residents were unaware of volunteer opportunities within the community. For example, many residents were unaware that the Russian Jack Community Council existed. One resident noted, “I look for opportunities to help, but I don't know where to look.”

Key Recommendations

- **Develop a resource list of services proximate and relevant to Russian Jack residents.** Russian Jack is a diverse, lower income, dense housing neighborhood whose residents indicated a desire for increased service quality and connection to services. NeighborWorks Alaska could take the lead in cataloguing services available and lacking as regards the Russian Jack community. Service overlaps and gaps could then be communicated to partner agencies, community leaders, and decision makers. The resultant resource list could be printed as a card and distributed to residents. The style and much of the material from the resource list would be relevant and replicable for other Anchorage neighborhoods and NWAK service areas.

The process of collecting this list allows for organizational introductions and eventual cooperation. Delivering this resource list to the residents is a potential method for relevant organizations and stakeholders to achieve more significant outreach into the community. The resource list, and its delivery by relevant organizations and stakeholders, offers connections for residents to themselves become more engaged with their neighborhood.

- **Initiate community branding.** Many if not most residents of Russian Jack instead refer to the area as South Mountain View. Many nearby Anchorage neighborhoods possess a distinct identity through geographic isolation (e.g. Government Hill, Mountain View), neighborhood branding/signage (e.g. Rogers Park, Fairview), or a combination of elements (e.g. Spenard, South Addition). The Russian Jack community lacks these signposts. Branding a neighborhood offers positive resident unification and the ability to market the neighborhood on a unique basis to potential home owners and businesses. NWAK can be a leader in Russian Jack branding as part of NWA’s Stable Communities initiative.

- **Foster winter walkability.** While snow removal quality varies within the community for a variety of reasons, a majority of residents indicated that the community was difficult and dangerous to walk through during the winter. NWAK can support the creation of a volunteer “snowfighter”, or snow blower lending initiative, replicating the pilot program approved by the Fairview Community Council in July 2017.
- **Advocate for child safety while walking to and from school.** Resident perceptions of child safety while traveling to/from school significantly declined compared to 2013. NWAK can advocate for increased child safety to and from school by promoting and distributing the Municipality of Anchorage’s Safe Routes to School Manual. As child safety is not a localized concern, the promotion and distribution of the Safe Routes manual is replicable at all NWAK properties.

In addition, other cities, sometimes with support from NWA chartered members, have promoted child safety to and from school by painting paths on sidewalks that avoid neighborhood hazards (e.g. Chicago’s Safe Passage program). Painting paths is a logical and relatively inexpensive expansion of the Anchorage Safe Routes manual. Adult monitors to shepherd children along the safe routes is an additional option if sufficient funding is obtained.