



**Willmar, MN
Community Visit Report
September 22, 2011**

On Tuesday, September 27, 2011, The Chicano Latino Affairs Council held a community forum at the Oaks on Eagle Creek Golf Course. The purpose was to capture the voice of the Latino community on education and economic development. We were honored by the participation of representatives of the city, community colleges, universities, nonprofit organizations, community members, and other groups. We had great support from local leaders, good promotion of the event, and a productive and engaging session.

Meeting Agenda:

- I. Introductions and Networking
- II. Review of CLAC's mission and goals
- III. Forum objectives
- IV. Education : Achievement Gap
- V. Economic Development
- VI. General discussion
- VII. Video – Latino Artists: A Community Vision
- VIII. Civic Engagement
- IX. Adjournment

Presenters:

Hector Garcia, *Executive Director, CLAC*
Astrid Ollerenshaw, *Community Relations Manager, CLAC*

Host:

Roberto Valdez, *Program Coordinator, Willmar Area Multicultural Business Center*
Idalia "Charly" Leuze, *Executive Director, West Central Integration Collaborative*
Francisco J. Morales, *CLAC's Council Member*

Participants:

1. Charlene Stevens, City of Willmar
2. Paul Vega, Montevideo Public Schools
3. Roger Madison, Bremer Bank
4. Marian Sanchez, La Gran America
5. Andrew Hendrickson, Willmar Adult Basic Education

6. Jim Nicholson, Willmar Adult Basic Education
7. Caryl & Rolf Peterson, Peterson Brothers Funeral Home
8. Erika Obregon, West Central Integration Collaborative
9. Les Heitke, City of Willmar
10. Linda Vanderwerf, West Central Tribune
11. MaryAnn Doyle, Bremer Bank
12. Francisco Morales, Willmar Public Schools
13. Janine Vazquez, Willmar Public Schools
14. Charly Leuze, WCIC
15. Frank Yanish, City of Willmar
16. Ryan McCormick, Willmar Public Library
17. Gary Miller, West Central Tribune
18. J. P. Cola, KWLM
19. Margie Aranda
20. Roberto Valdez, WAMM
21. Tamara Valenzuela, Bremer Bank
22. Javier Valenzuela, Bremer Bank

Minutes:

The meeting took place at the dining room of the Oaks on Eagle Creek Golf Course.

Astrid presented meeting agenda, introduced, and thanked hosts. Astrid also introduced CLAC's executive director, Hector Garcia, who in turn presented an overview of CLAC's mission and goals.

Astrid made a presentation of statistics on the Latino education achievement gap. She pointed out that Minnesota's high-school graduation disparity between Latino and European American students is one of the worst in the U.S., but the MN Latino graduation rate is near the national Latino median rate. The situation in Willmar and the surrounding area is the same as in the rest of the state; this area has a 44% high school graduation rate in four years for Latinos.

Hector presented data and comments on economic development in Minnesota and the need for an educated workforce in the state. He referred to a published study from Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce "Help Wanted: Projections of Jobs and Education Requirements Through 2018." This study indicates that Minnesota will be the second state in terms of the need for a well-educated workforce, meaning that some higher education will be required by 70% of the jobs.

Community Participation:

- Thank you Hector. There is some discomfort in community because of so many changes. But there are positive changes. New businesses pop up and empty

buildings are reutilized. The Willmar Chamber of Commerce says the Latino community has grown substantially in having businesses in the area. This changes attitude, it means, "people are really here to stay". Willmar has certainly made an effort to support small business development. When small businesses succeed, they buy locally, put their kids in the schools, they pay taxes-- the community really does succeed.

- The biggest thing to get rid of is poverty. Poverty drives everything, Latinos need to make a living wage and that isn't what is happening right now. The parents are unable to have a living wage to support their children.
- ED: What do you attribute the low wages too?
- Jobs that are available.
- We have been inadequate in bringing the immigrant population into our work force, even the entry level positions. The progress is very slow, not a quick fix. Whatever plan that is in place has to be a long-term plan.
- ED: This problem is very common for businesses and schools especially. We need to understand where that comes from. Immigrants get intimidated and it takes a while to get them motivated or organized to be part of a school or organization. It makes it even more difficult for teachers and schools to engage them. It takes time and it takes creating trust. The intimidation leads to lasting distrust. Of course, language is a barrier to education as well.
- How many generations does it take to establish a well-functioning community?
- ED: If the right things are done, it would take the second generation. Reaching out to the parents is key. Businesses and others are not going to mistreat you. It takes education and situations like this where people can interact openly and elevate that trust.
- Latino socioeconomic status is changing rapidly. If it weren't for agencies like this, this wouldn't be happening and Willmar wouldn't be where it's at now. Education breeds word of mouth and creating relationships. One family achieving something spills over to their families and cousins and the community. Educating minority populations in communities like this is what counts.
- ED: There is room for hope. We convened the top experts in education to discuss the achievement gap and asked for valuable insights as to what can be done. The Northfield and Sleepy Eye programs demonstrated that the achievement gap is not destined to stay the same. They got up to 90 and 100% graduation rates because people were totally committed to making it happen. They acknowledged that the students were not like regular students, they simply were aware of it. We are developing a model throughout the whole state that would replicate that.
- CR: We are also working on legislative recommendations, like budgeting and regulations, so the state can best help this situation.

- ED: One of the first things that jumped out at me about this job was commissioners getting minority community members together and handing us a plan and asking us to agree to the plans without having much input. What nobody asks the group is, “Do you want to come to the table before we design this plan?” it’s about partnership. Given an opportunity to work with leadership, we can succeed as long as there is a respect and interest in new opinions. President Obama’s job czar pointed out that Americans can always succeed if we partner together. Invite your Latino community members to sit down with you and partner with you in designing solutions.
- Immigration is a definite challenge. How do you move on once you graduate high school? What can we do?
- ED: Immigration reform is a huge challenge. Those changes need to take place at the federal level. States like Arizona have tried to prod the federal government, but the same prodding can be done in a positive way. We need to broaden the dialogue so that it encompasses the source of the problem on immigration. We discuss undocumented immigration, but very few discuss the source of undocumented immigration. What’s the origin? Are these millions of crazy people who are just out to violate the law? The reality doesn’t end at the border of Mexico, we need to understand what is going on that is making those people cross the border. Co-founded Minnesotans for NAFTA.
- Tried to no avail to appoint Latinos to certain committees throughout the city. Zero success. I’ve gone to the leaders of the Latino community, and I’m not sure else to do.
- ED: Civic engagement is one of the great virtues of American society. In Latin America, people rarely have an opportunity to become civically engaged.
- Would not members of the Latino community be more likely to want to be engaged now that they have the chance to get involved?
- ED: Not necessarily. Engagement is not the case in Latin America. The American-style of civic engagement has to be instilled.
- Usually it’s an issue of trust. If they know you, they will engage. The personal connection is key and they will be more likely to volunteer for things, etc. Perhaps if they see you at some local Latino event, that will build some trust and connections. They have to really know you.
- Trust leads to encouragement.
- It’s more important that they trust me, not that I do not trust them.
- CR: It’s all about relationships, very important.
- In Venezuela, we don’t trust politicians. Politics is something we try to avoid.
- It’s very important that we don’t burn the bridges in a relationship. Disappointments hurt credibility and it goes downward from there.

- ED: Latinos communicate in a very different way. I used to be really intimidated in board meetings and other events; they conducted themselves in a very serious way. I couldn't feel at ease.
- Latinos don't really set time limits or agendas. There has to be a social interaction and that trust needs to be established.
- ED: Perhaps you could consider combining the two. Hold some social event and then talk about what you want to talk about.
- Sometimes getting volunteers is just difficult because of working households, etc.
- When we try to bring the community in, we just assume it's done a certain way. Latinos would prefer to build trust and feel comfortable first, then once that is established, Latinos will work very hard. Immediate commitments are not the focal point.
- It takes communication but it does work.
- There has to be someone to reach out.
- Building a relationship takes time and sometimes our European background is so efficient. It's a whole different process than relationship building. Minorities need allies that come from the established community. There's no shortcut to time spent with other people. Listening.

Next Action Steps:

- Plan a follow up meeting with more community leaders
- Define a strategy to integrate and better help immigrant communities
- Define a strategy to promote Latinos and Latino culture in St Cloud and present these videos. Mail DVD to those that requested it.
- Participants would like to help determine and analyze how to reduce the education achievement gap. When a strategy is developed to reduce education achievement gap, they would like us to include this area and city and help them with their issues in education.

Meeting adjourned at 7:15 pm