



Cleveland Harbor Eastern Embayment Resilience Study (CHEERS)

Podcast Interview Transcript

Diana Pietri: So today I'm speaking with Freddy Collier, the Director of City Planning for the City of Cleveland, and Kelly Coffman, Cleveland Metroparks' Strategic Park Planner. The City of Cleveland, Cleveland Metroparks, and other partners recently released a new study: The Cleveland Harbor Eastern Embayment Resilience Study, also known as CHEERS. The purpose of this study is to map a path forward for restoring the hardened shoreline of Lake Erie on Cleveland's East Side to a more natural and resilient state. The study outlines a vision for connecting people to the lake, creating spaces that meet community needs, protecting infrastructure and natural habitat, and celebrating the cultural significance and history of the lake. Director Collier and Kelly, thank you for joining me today!

Freddy Collier: Thank you.

Kelly Coffman: Thanks for having us.

DP: Great. Well first of all, what a great acronym and name that you came up with for the study!

KC: It's kind of fun, and I think it expresses some of the character of the study that we're really looking to capitalize on; assets and have some fun.

DP: Wonderful. Well, building on that, you know, one of the things I wanted to talk to you both today about is community outreach. Community outreach is one of the pillars of the work you conducted for CHEERS and the project team engaged over 1,500 community members and stakeholders throughout the process. Can you explain more for me what these efforts entailed?

KC: Yeah, definitely. You know, I think we were at an advantage from the beginning in having the five project partners because we already had kind of an expanded network and, you know, an attitude towards consensus building from the very beginning. We were able to engage about 12 other community organizations and then over 40 stakeholders that sometimes were representing organizations and sometimes were kind of their own as part of a, you know, kind of a community advocacy effort. So, kind of with that base, then we used a variety of tools to reach out to generate feedback from the community because particularly neighborhood input was just the foundational element of the CHEERS project. We weren't really interested in a prescriptive solution where our five entities came and presented a solution to the neighborhood—we wanted to hear from the community what they would like to see and build from there. So I can speak to the tools. You know, we kicked off the project right at the beginning of the pandemic, so obviously so many unknowns, but we pivoted immediately to online tools and really conducted the most extensive online engagement that I've been a part of. But as the pandemic eased, we could get away from some of the Zoom meetings and do some small group socially-distanced walking tours that we called "walkshops" and some other forms of engagement, and then as the weather turned cold and COVID kind of surged back, we did transition back to some more online. So, it was really kind of toggling back and forth, based on what the situation was.

FC: Yeah, and I would say, um, with respect to resilience, obviously COVID-19 tested the resilience of the partners, and I think, in a good way, because it really denoted the commitment to the effort. A lot of planning initiatives and efforts around, I'm sure, around the country either halted altogether or people gave up or put it on pause. But with this effort, it continued to thrive even though some very challenging issues, of course. But when you look at the

effort overall, to Kelly's point, the engagement was dynamic, it wasn't one-dimensional. It was a situation where the partners, Metroparks and those involved kind of took what was given to us and leveraged it, and just the number of people who participated is a testament to how important it is, and I think that's what really is the thing that builds confidence, when you know that it matters to folks.

DP: Yeah, thanks for that. And building on that theme of resilience, I think that's a really great point that you made about the resilience of the partners and those involved, but another thing I was wondering about is how you think these efforts and everything you did as part of CHEERS and for this study will build the social resilience of the communities surrounding Cleveland harbor.

FC: Yeah, I will say this, the relationship between people and land is important. And when we think about the legacy of structural racism and the lack of access to amenities, those are policy decisions, you know, and how we allow people to access land is really going to be key to creating equity as we move forward in the future. And another reason why I think this initiative was really relevant is because, and I've said this before on many occasions, you know, open space, access to these amenities, the water is God's gift to the community, and everybody should have access to it no matter what their income is or ability level is, and open space is a great equalizer. You know, when you have open space, people get really creative, and I think that's key to this notion of social cohesion, is creating the spaces and the places where you don't have the hierarchy, you know, where everybody is literally on an equal playing field so, we see this whole effort as something that is going to help to change the culture a bit, of how we think about policy and how we think about how we invest in our waterfront.

DP: Yeah, building on that—and those are great points about equity and about thinking about that community engagement—while those are great outcomes to achieve, sometimes when you're engaging diverse communities and cultures, I've seen, and you've described in other conversations with our team, this is a very diverse area with a confluence of different cultures. How did the project team have to adapt their engagement methods to ensure culturally sensitive engagement strategies in the types of activities you described previously, Kelly?

KC: We were really fortunate to have great support from the local community development corporations. Cleveland has a tremendous group of CDCs, and in some cases, it was something we should all be paying attention to, but it was in our project materials, in our renderings, making sure that the people illustrated in those documents reflect the community that we're serving. In other cases, it was translating the community survey. We had the survey translated into Spanish and to Mandarin to meet the community where they are. And then part of it is a more simple, kind of one-to-one, our team and our partnerships, we've gone basically wherever we're invited. We love to share the news about CHEERS, whether it's a community festival, whether it's an online presentation at a group's monthly meeting, and then the other piece that's grown from this is that we're not really looking at this as a single project. We're looking at this as an ongoing relationship, and there are interim steps that can be taken before the bright shiny object is in place. This Saturday we have a popup event in one of the existing parks, and that's made possible through a number of additional partners. So, I feel that we've been really fortunate that people have joined the effort and continue to add to what we're trying to do with CHEERS.

DP: Well, that's great to hear about those continued efforts, and the last question I have for you both is, what's next for CHEERS?

FC: Well, I'll start by saying implementation. You know, plans are—sit on the shelf because people don't move on them, it's not because the planning is bad, it's because people don't act. And I think you have a coalition of people who are willing. There is the political will, we're in an election year this year; however, I think that everyone in our community, I think, understands clearly how important leveraging our waterfront assets are. And equity has become a hallmark in the hearts and minds of people from the highest level all the way down to, you know, Mrs. Smith on 123 Street, so I think it's become a value. So, I don't think the effort will ever be lost, and the good thing about this project is its one of those projects that I think people see as lasting beyond them. You know, it's not about you, it's about what you can do, for the people and the community, and this is one of those gifting-type projects where it's gonna gift something to the neighborhoods and to the residents. And going after money, you know, I can't stress that enough, these plans and products as an enticement to get money, you know, that's really what they're designed to do, and we at the city from a financial standpoint as well as from a regulatory standpoint, we didn't talk much about that. You know, we have to help create the conditions for these things to happen.

DP: Sure, that all makes sense. Well, thank you both, it's really exciting to hear about what you've achieved thus far and to think about how resilience practitioners can really be considering equity in their projects and the way that they are approaching these types of large-scale restoration activities, so I really appreciate your time today and thank you both so much. I really look forward to hearing about the new achievements you have in the area.

KC: Excellent, thank you.

FC: Thank you.