Introduction

Irrigate is a community placemaking initiative led by Springboard for the Arts in partnership with the City of Saint Paul, LISC and many of Saint Paul’s most influential and innovative organizations and leaders.

This unique public-private partnership provides a model of community-based placemaking that leverages infrastructure development, a high concentration of resident artists, a diverse ethnic and cultural mix, and a city with a strong track record of artist community engagement.

“At the intersection of regional development and the arts, this public-private collaboration is beautifully positioned to forge creative, comprehensive approaches to transit-oriented development in the Twin Cities, with a strategic focus on how artists will contribute to its success.” Kate Wolford, President, The McKnight Foundation

Irrigate mobilizes artists to engage in their community to change the landscape of the Central Corridor with color, art, surprise, creativity and fun. In the process, Irrigate has had a positive impact on the narrative and resulting community perceptions of the community development transit initiative.

"The biggest common thread I've seen in the Irrigate projects is that they are really about what's possible in the neighborhood. They're not big flashy art installations, but they're about building ties between the people who live in the neighborhood. They're about communicating to people that there are reasons to come to the Central Corridor even during construction." Laura Zäbel, Executive Director, Springboard for the Arts

The following report provides an analysis of the impact of the Irrigate initiative on the community narrative through earned media coverage garnered to date. At this, the mid-point in the project, these metrics provide a look back at the success of the initiative over the course of its first 18 months as well as a benchmark against which to measure the impact of the second half of the work.
Irrigate’s Impact

Theory of Change: During times of disruption, social capital can be built quickly. Irrigate uses the disruption of the Central Corridor construction project to engage Saint Paul’s active creative class to help local communities along the corridor build social capital through placemaking. Through placemaking, the Irrigate initiative has engaged the community to support small businesses. The initiative provides a sense of what’s possible when the community engages in creative placemaking, turning a challenging period of transition into an energizing and exciting opportunity to strengthen the community.

“There’s been more collaboration between artists and the city than at any other point in our history.” Mayor Chris Coleman, City of St. Paul

For 18 months, Irrigate has been mobilizing artists to transform the Central Corridor into a place where community interacts and thrives:

- 18 months into the 3 year initiative
- 450+ local artists completed training led by Springboard for the Arts
- 100+ placemaking projects
- Impacting the six Saint Paul district councils along the Central Corridor: Downtown, Frogtown, Summit-University, Hamline Midway, Union Park, St. Anthony Park

“No Twin Cities initiative has put the “public” in public art like this. The ambitious attempt to seed the construction-blighted Central Corridor route in St. Paul, along University Avenue, with hundreds of art projects has gone beyond eye-pleasing to real community development. (Like Clifford Dodd’s posters mapping black-owned businesses.) The urban planners receiving national attention for Irrigate call this “creative placemaking,” a buzzword for shaping an area through culture. We call it saving the day.” Minnesota Monthly Magazine (November 2012)
Contributing to the Narrative: Earned Media’s Influence on Community Perception and Engagement

**Quantity:** Irrigate has received significant coverage by print, broadcast and online media covering the Saint Paul region impacted by the Central Corridor project. Coverage has focused on the initiative as a whole as well as stories specific to the many unique projects. In addition to profile pieces on the initiative, Irrigate was often included in general stories about the Central Corridor initiative as a positive contributor to community development along the line.

**Reach:** 30 million impressions (circulation times 2.5) reaching all six of the relevant Saint Paul district councils, and the city as a whole.
**Regional Impact:** While coverage of the Irrigate project reached all six communities, the majority of the coverage focused on projects central to Downtown, St. Anthony Park, Summit-University and Frogtown. Hamline-Midway area projects received minimal coverage. Current searches did not identify any coverage of projects in the Union Park district. This could be due to the location of projects, impact of community-based media or other factors. This gap in coverage provides an opportunity in the second phase of this work to identify ways to more intentionally engage the Hamline-Midway and Union Park communities.

(Breakdown of media coverage related to projects in each district, as well as general coverage related to the region as a whole. Media coverage tracking does not include posts made by participating organizations to their websites and blogs.)
**Message Penetration:** Stories about Irrigate as a whole as well as stories about the projects consistently highlighted the key words and messaging central to the Irrigate initiative. Messaging focused on community development, artists, creativity, placemaking, business and the people making a contributing to the impact of the initiative along the Central Corridor.

Whether the central focus was Irrigate, its funding, a partner or a unique project, it was evident that the common message of placemaking through artist engagement that connects all elements of the initiative is relevant, important and inspiring to the communities the initiative is aiming to reach with its message. This level of message clarity and consistency is an important indicator of the initiative’s impact on the overall narrative.

It is clear that without Irrigate, there would be limited positive messaging related to the construction zone.

**Tone:** The tone of all articles related to Irrigate was positive. In addition, there were no identified instances of Irrigate being included in negative articles about the Central Corridor project. In one case, Irrigate is directly credited with turning the negative coverage about the Central Corridor construction into having something positive to talk about in relation to the project.

“After months of negative stories about the impact of light rail construction on the communities it intersects, the news about placemaking along the light rail corridor also includes ‘engagement and fun, lightness and surprise’.” Lisa Steinman, Neighborhood Notes
Social Media:

Irrigate placemaking is being talked about all over!

- 44,000 impressions on Facebook
- 5,015 impressions on YouTube & Vimeo
- 1,453 tweets on Twitter
Community Perceptions

Through its many touch points with the community surrounding the Central Corridor, the Irrigate initiative has positioned itself as shining light, bringing life, hope and vision to the people and businesses impacted by the Central Corridor project. Through partnerships with funders, engagement of artists, many small projects and the resulting media coverage, the Irrigate initiative is recognized by key community leaders as a catalyst that changed the narrative and continues to positively impact the community and its perceptions for the Central Corridor project.

Community leaders with a commitment to the Central Corridor and an ear to the ground in the community shared their reflections on the impact of Irrigate on the Central Corridor narrative.

While the City of Saint Paul tried feverishly to garner positive coverage for the benefits of transit that the Central Corridor would bring to the community, their positive message was consistently diluted in the media by negative stories about the impact of construction. As Irrigate projects began popping up along the Corridor in unexpected ways, the disruption of the many small projects quickly had a surprising impact. The magic of art started a different conversation, something that couldn’t have been predicted but was such a blessing. Irrigate’s public process engaging artists from the community to support local businesses provided a nimble and creative way to influence the narrative and change community perceptions of the value of community development. Irrigate’s approach taught the public sector that sometimes it’s alright to let go of the bureaucratic process to allow for a more organic process of community engagement. Nancy Homans, Policy Director, City of Saint Paul

Irrigate began influence the overall narrative at the darkest hour of the construction narrative (construction problems, business mitigation and access issues). There’s no doubt the series of small but notable projects helped turn the narrative around. The narrative created by Irrigate inform a larger view of the future, helping people begin to see what the Corridor will look like, how it will feel to be part of the community along the Corridor. Irrigate initiated the early ripple that began to turn the tide of peoples’ perception about the Corridor. It allowed people to look beyond immediate access issues.

Irrigate seems to be everywhere at once, which adds to the energy of the stakeholders involved in all aspects of the project. While some people may not be able to name Irrigate, when they talk about what’s going on along the Corridor, they’re experiences are influenced by the many unique projects. The aggregation of these smaller projects has led to a general sense that there are creative, interesting things happening all along the Corridor. As this momentum continues, Irrigate has the opportunity to tell the bigger story of its impact in creative a cultural corridor – a long-term view that the Central Corridor is a place to experience the arts and culture of the local community. Jonathan Sage Martinson, Director, Central Corridor Funders Collaborative

Irrigate has really maximized the idea of small is beautiful. The Irrigate initiative has brought to life the concept that any one individual can take an idea and connect it to a broader community experience. Irrigate leveraged the construction and the coming of the new light rail line to engage local artists to harness the power of their ideas to rebuild a sense of community, energizing individuals and businesses to take part in something bigger than each individual project. The initiative offers an accessible way for the community to be part of the solution. As a community-driven program rather than a public/government initiative, overtime Irrigate has built on itself, activating more neighborhood organizations, artists and local businesses. Pretty soon, you started to see it everywhere. Irrigate has taken hold and it’s really exciting. Andriana Abariotes, Executive Director, Twin Cities LISC
Considerations

The earned media impact captured in this mid-project report does not reflect measurement against a baseline. Therefore, we cannot accurately assess perception change based on pre-initiative media coverage. It is clear, however, that Irrigate has been part of the conversation from the start and continues to be central to the narrative.

This report provides an illustration of the reach and message penetration of the initiative thus far. It also provides a framework against which to measure the next phase of Irrigate’s work in the communities along the Central Corridor line.

Media audit and summary conducted by Tunheim

Founded in 1990, Tunheim is one of the most respected full-service strategic communications firms in the Upper Midwest. Tunheim is recognized for success in the strategy, management and execution of local, regional and national public relations, public affairs and community engagement campaigns. Through a strong bias for a strategic approach, Tunheim provided an objective assessment of the impact of the Irrigate initiative on the media narrative surrounding the Central Corridor. The approach focused on quantity of media coverage, relevancy of messaging, breadth of coverage, and assessment of public perception.

Irrigate is made possible by the generous support of: