Nonprofits, Local Government, and City Residents Brokering Actions and Ideas through ACTion Alexandria (www.actionalexandria.org)

Summative Evaluation

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This summative evaluation reports on a 3-year long evaluation of ACTion Alexandria based upon web analytics, interviews, surveys, content analysis, and network analysis. ACTion Alexandria is a local community engagement platform for Alexandria, Virginia, consisting of a website (http://www.actionalexandria.org), social media accounts, and personnel (full-time community manager, part-time staff, and steering committee). It was set up as a pilot project and funded by the city government, Bruhn-Morris Foundation, and a Knight Community Information Challenge grant.

This evaluation examines how well the platform promoted community engagement, collaboration, and problem solving. It also considers the factors that led to successes and unresolved challenges. This includes a detailed analysis of (1) Actions (and Featured Actions) that help raise awareness of immediate nonprofit needs, (2) Community Challenges that allow residents, nonprofits, and the city government to collaboratively generate and vote on Ideas tied to specific community issues, and (3) Spring2ACTion, a community-wide fundraising effort sponsored by ACTion Alexandria. Overall, there is strong evidence that ACTion Alexandria made a significant contribution in its role as a civic action broker, though there are still challenges that will need to be met in order to make it a self-sustaining enterprise.

Overall Impact

- A total of 105 Actions were posted by nonprofits, resulting in 497 individual contributions recorded on the website (and many more not recorded). The community manager helped nonprofits develop and promote 16 of them, called Featured Actions (see Table 3). All but 1 met their goal and many exceeded their goal by 2-3 times the original request. In total, Featured Actions helped solicit 3,920 items (valued at $4,338) and over $10,000 in donations from individual and corporate matching funds to meet specific needs (e.g., $2,500 for a toy drive). Non-Featured Actions were responded to only 2 times on average compared to 20 average responses for Featured Actions. Though highly successful, the return on investment was somewhat marginal since Featured Actions required considerable effort by the community manager.

- A total of 17 Community Challenges were run (Table 4), which solicited 288 Ideas from 124 different people, 200 comments on those ideas, and 7,707 votes. The most successful Challenges were tied to a competition for a grant, such as the Project Play “Spruce Up” grant (which helped raise and distribute $92,500 for playground improvements and led to the creation of the ongoing Project Play Taskforce) and Caring for Kids Grant Challenge (which distributed $20,000). Though some of this funding may have occurred without ACTion Alexandria, funders appreciated the unique crowdsourcing process that helped galvanize energy around a topic, solicit ideas from the community, and raise further awareness and funds. Other Challenges, such as the Greener Alexandria Challenge solicited new ideas (20) and votes (827), though some Challenges struggled to get sufficient responses. Overall, Community Challenges fill a
unique niche in the Alexandria, VA information ecosystem and can likely be put to good future use, perhaps via continued partnerships with the city government.

- **ACTion Alexandria ran a community-wide fundraising event for local nonprofits in 2011, 2012, and 2013, called Spring2Action.** Though not part of the original vision for ACTion Alexandria, they were extremely successful at fundraising, largely due to their role as a civic action broker between citizens and nonprofits. ACTion Alexandria helped train nonprofits in online fundraising, found sponsors who donated funds to nonprofits who raised the most money or had the most donors during the 1-day Spring2Action event. Over $1,000,000 was raised over the 3 years including $104,156 (for 48 participating nonprofits) in 2011, $274,288 + $80,000 in matching donations (for 69 participating nonprofits) in 2012, and $546,369 + $114,000 in matching donations (for 97 participating nonprofits) in 2013. Nonprofits were overwhelmed by the positive response and the dramatic increase in the amount raised each year suggests this will continue to be successful in the future.

**Engagement**

- There were a total of 56,000 unique visits to the ACTion Alexandria website by 37,000 unique visitors (i.e., unique browsers); 37% were return visitors.
- A total of 3,701 visitors registered for the site. 54% contributed in some way and 41% signed up for the email newsletter. Most visitors joined in order to vote or participate in a Community Challenge, though many joined in order to participate in an Action. Users’ ages mirror the demographics of Alexandria, with ethnic minorities and men under-represented on the site. As is typical of online participation, a small percent were highly active (60 users; 2% of registered users), or active (418; 11%), and the majority were less active (1,509; 41%) or passive (1,714; 46%), where activity is based on the number of website contributions (e.g., Highly active = 5 or more actions, less active = 1 activity).
- Social media is used heavily and drives significant traffic to the website and events. This includes the ACTion Alexandria Facebook page (with 631 Likes / follower), Twitter account (2,011 followers), and website blog (over 33,000 page views).
- In all, 145 organizations are registered on the website, 65 (45%) of whom have performed an online activity such as post an event (43 orgs posted 120 events), blog (43 orgs wrote 100 blog posts), or action (29 orgs posted 65 actions). This is a high for a single city, emphasizing the role ACTion Alexandria plays as a civic action broker between citizens and nonprofits.
- Overall, these numbers and interviews show that residents and nonprofits had increased awareness of community activities and needs and that those needs were met more quickly and fully (via Actions) than in the past. Residents were more engaged in fundraising (via Spring2Action), and idea generation (via Community Challenges), though not all idea generation opportunities solicited sufficient engagement.

**Collaboration**

- ACTion Alexandria helped residents become more aware of opportunities for collaboration (via Actions, Community Challenges, and Spring2Action) via the website, email list, and social media use.
Community Challenges, which were bigger than a single nonprofit, helped solicit input from diverse groups and individuals (especially experts) and fostered collaborations that would not have happened without ACTion Alexandria, such as the Project Play Taskforce, and increasingly opportunities to work with local government.

The Spring2Action collaborative nonprofit fundraising event (see above) was able to raise significantly more money due to the collaboration than nonprofits individually.

A strong sense of community among the ACTion Alexandria participants was not realized for most participants who only participated occasionally.

Problem Solving

- Problems and community needs were met more effectively and quickly via Actions, though the overall return on investment was relatively small.
- Some brainstorming and critiquing of possible solutions occurred for Challenges that were tied to grants (e.g., Project Play), though other Challenges failed to solicit significant participation.
- The problem of fundraising for local community nonprofits was addressed extremely well through the Spring2ACTion event.

Lessons Learned and Next Steps

- The remainder of this document identifies the factors that led to success and failures. A few of the most critical factors included: the role of a community manager, use of social media (including an email list), and the unique position of ACTion Alexandria as a civic action broker that helped connect residents with nonprofit and city government needs. The most significant challenges relate to the long-term sustainability and scalability of ACTion Alexandria.
- We recommend two potential paths forward for ACTion Alexandria. (1) Continue to build ACTion Alexandria by emphasizing Community Challenges (some of which may be transitioned into Actions) important to residents, considering ways to more explicitly partner with the City Government while still remaining independent (perhaps via a new grant), and building a stronger online community among residents by partnering with existing email lists and neighborhood groups. (2) End the pilot project and focus more limited resources on continuing the Spring2Action fundraising campaign and occasional Community Challenges tied to grants for nonprofit groups or popular topics of interest to residents and the city government.
INTRODUCTION

This document contains the summative evaluation report for the ACTion Alexandria project (www.actionalexandria.org) referred to throughout this document as “the platform” or “the project”. The program was developed by the ACT for Alexandria Foundation (hereafter, “ACT”) in collaboration with Rad Campaign (www.radcampaign.com) with funding from the City of Alexandria, the Bruhn Morris Foundation, and the Knight Foundation (via a competitively awarded Knight Community Information Challenge grant). ACT contracted a multidisciplinary team of researchers and evaluators from Brigham Young University, the University of Maryland, and UXR Consulting, Inc. to conduct all phases of the evaluation. Throughout the project from pre-launch into the early ramp-up phase, the evaluation team provided monthly reports on site usage statistics, participated in regular stakeholder meetings, and provided a baseline report on the formative evaluation results of the project.¹ This report focuses on the summative evaluation of the project which incorporates data from the start of the project in August 2010, to the online platform’s launch in February 2011, through the end of the evaluation period in August 2013.

ACTion Alexandria sought to bring together three key stakeholder groups in the City of Alexandria: nonprofit organizations, local city government, and city residents, in order to facilitate problem solving and civic action. It was a pilot study intended to make a difference within the city, as well as learn generalizable principles about how to make civic engagement work at a city level. This evaluation reports on both aspects.

The summative evaluation was guided by the following questions:

1. To what extent and in what ways does the platform and associated activities encourage Alexandria residents to become engaged in their community and solve problems?
2. What were the key components of the platform that contributed to its successes?
3. What were the key challenges for the project that limited its success or reach?

This report contains a detailed description of the project, the methods used to conduct the summative evaluation, key findings organized by stakeholder group and the intended outcomes: engagement, collaboration, problem-solving. It ends with a summary of key findings and discussion of future opportunities.

BACKGROUND

ACTion Alexandria

ACTion Alexandria is a platform designed to broker civic actions in the form of ideas and specific activities in Alexandria, VA. As others have done, we use the term ‘platform’ in its broadest socio-technical sense to encompass not only the technical aspects of the system (its features and affordances), but also the core social or human elements of the system (its human mediators, participants, policies, and social context). The platform includes a website (http://www.actionalexandria.org/), Twitter account (@ACTionAlexVA), Facebook page (www.facebook.com/ACTionAlexandria), a full-time paid Community Manager responsible for the day-to-day operations and outreach efforts, additional part-time staff (e.g., bloggers), a steering committee, and policies and procedures that underlie its use. This report covers the time period from February 2011, prior to the programs launch, until August 2013.

ACTion Alexandria seeks to “empower citizens to take collective action on behalf of themselves and local organizations”. Its three stated goals are to:

1. Create a vibrant online platform that inspires offline action, where challenges are posted, solutions are debated, successes and failures are archived, data is both disseminated and captured, stories are shared, and essential civic relationships are developed.
2. Improve the quality of life for its most vulnerable residents in a cost-efficient manner through a platform that provides everyone a voice and the opportunity to identify problems and offer solutions.
3. Engage residents and business people in problem solving to strengthen community ties and increase each individual’s stake in creating positive outcomes for specific community problems.

Program Outcomes

The evaluation team worked with ACT to identify outcomes and associated indicators to assess the effectiveness of the project in three outcome categories: engagement, collaboration, and problem-solving (see Table 1). Short-term outcomes were tied to the early phase of the project (~1 year after implementation), medium-term outcomes were tied to the end of the evaluation period (~3 years after implementation), and long-term outcomes were more aspirational and visionary and were tied to a longer time period than the evaluation (~5 years or more). This summative evaluation reports on the extent to which the short- and medium-term outcomes were achieved by the project. The term “participant” is used to refer generally to any of the key audiences for the project including nonprofit organizations, government organizations, and city residents. The term “project” encompasses all aspects of the ACTion Alexandria effort including the web-based platform, social media efforts, and project-sponsored activities and events.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Indicators/Data sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Engagement</strong></td>
<td><strong>Short Term</strong></td>
<td>Participants will be more aware of groups, events, opportunities, and services in Alexandria due to ACTion Alexandria. Participants will feel empowered to engage with fellow residents and organizations through ACTion Alexandria.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>● usage statistics of the platform ● social media participation ● participants describe learning about new orgs/events ● survey responses to questions about awareness ● scores on Likert-scale questions related to engagement ● posts and interview comments related to empowerment and desire to act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Medium Term</strong></td>
<td>Participants will attend more community events, join more groups, and use more services due to ACTion Alexandria. Participants will announce and discuss events and issues of importance to Alexandria.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>● participation in activities and events ● social media participation ● increased first-time participation by residents ● increase in network density of person-to-group networks as identified through social network analysis ● posts on platform related to announcements ● evidence of discussions on the platform related to community activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Long Term</strong></td>
<td>Participants will reflect on their community participation and evaluate ways for continued improvement and collaboration. The ACTion Alexandria community will become self-sustaining</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[Not assessed during this evaluation]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Collaboration</strong></td>
<td><strong>Short Term</strong></td>
<td>Participants will be more aware of opportunities to work with each other. Participants will feel that they are part of a community working to solve local problems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>● participation on the platform and in events sponsored by the project ● social media participation ● increased awareness of other groups identified by surveys and interviews ● scores on Likert-type scales from surveys related to collaboration</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Medium Term** | • evidence of small groups forming around specific ideas on platform or through events sponsored by the project  
• evidence of effective partnerships from interviews  
• evidence of new bridging social network ties |
| **Long Term** | [Not assessed during this evaluation] |

| **Problem solving** | **Short Term** | • participation on the platform and in events sponsored by the project  
• social media participation  
• self-reported awareness of community issues in surveys and interviews  
• log analysis of website traffic will increase over time |
| **Medium Term** | Participants will be aware of needs/problems that arise in the community  
Participants will solve some small-scale projects |
| **Long Term** | [Not assessed during this evaluation] |

| **Medium Term** | Participants will create groups and partnerships with each other to address problems.  
Participants will brainstorm and critique possible solutions to problems using ACTion Alexandria  
Participants will solve many small-scale problems and solve a few large-scale problems |

| **Long Term** | Participants will have an increased capacity to more effectively and efficiently solve local problems.  
Participants will solve community problems efficiently and effectively  
A significant volume of problems will be solved by the platform, making the City a better place, and transforming the way the philanthropy happens in our community |
Project Description
Alexandria, VA, is known as one of the most generous cities with high levels of citizen donations and a thriving non-profit community, due in part to its proximity to the D.C. area. For example, Alexandria was ranked the second-most generous city with a population greater than 100,000 people in 2011 according to Convio, and in 2012 by Blackbaud. A key component of the platform’s social context is an initiative of the City’s community foundation called ACT for Alexandria, which serves as a catalyst for increasing charitable efforts in the community. ACT and the City of Alexandria helped raise funding for the development of the ACTion Alexandria platform from local nonprofit organizations and a Community Information Challenge grant from the John S. and James L. Knight foundation.

ACTion Alexandria aims to achieve its primary goals through a variety of mechanisms that help residents connect with local nonprofit organizations and government agencies. First, community members can seek out and complete Actions – small donations of items, funds, or volunteer efforts that are posted by a local nonprofit or government agency. The “ACT Now” page (linked to from the homepage shown in Figure 1) allows people to browse and search through current and prior actions (Figure 2).

Figure 1: ACTion Alexandria homepage, a civic action brokering website in Alexandria, VA.
Figure 2: ACT Now page showing search functionality and 2 active actions.

All actions can be listed and filtered by category (Arts & Culture; Education; Environment; Food & Shelter; Health; Neighborhoods), by neighborhood (of which there are 8), or keyword. By default, active actions are shown in a list on the page. If selected, a page associated with the action is presented with a description of the action and a “Take Action” button that can be clicked to initiate the next steps in the action (e.g., take the user to a donation website or an Amazon wishlist). Additionally, certain Actions are chosen by ACTion Alexandria to be Featured Actions, which show up on the main page (in the spotlight panel on the left-hand side of Figure 1 and in the list at the bottom-left column), at the top of the ACT Now page (Figure 2), and in the email list and social media postings.

Second, residents and organizations can help brainstorm and vote on Ideas to Community Challenges identified by ACTion Alexandria and the greater Alexandria philanthropic community. When users click on the “Share your ideas” link on the main page (Figure 1) they are taken to a page listing all active Challenges, along with the number of ideas already submitted to each one. Visitors can click on a specific Challenge to see its description, deadlines for voting, and ideas posted by registered users (Figure 3). Registered users are given 3 votes per challenge to use on their preferred ideas. Users can also post comments associated with each idea. Ideas are sorted so that those with the highest number of votes are at the top.
Actions and ideas, as well as local events, such as in-person training for nonprofits, are promoted via the ACTion Alexandria website, Facebook page, and Twitter account, as well as emailed to a list of registered users who have opted in. Finally, residents and organizations can communicate in less structured ways by blogging (and commenting) on the ACTion Alexandria website, posting on the Facebook wall, mentioning the Twitter account, or talking in person at local meetings and events. The majority of these activities are managed on a day-to-day basis by the Community Manager and part-time staff (e.g., bloggers) with input from the ACTion Alexandria steering committee and volunteers.

METHODS

The research design called for a multiple-method, case-study approach to answer the overarching evaluation questions. In this way, the assumptions and purposes of one method could be balanced and accounted for by triangulation with another method.\(^4\) Data for this project were collected as part of a multi-year evaluation effort, which includes multiple surveys of residents (before the site’s launch and after it had been operational for eight months), notes from meetings held with the ACTion Alexandria steering committee, content from the ACTion Alexandria website (e.g., text from blogs, actions, and ideas), interviews and web-based surveys with organizations who were Featured Actions of the site in the first year, website and social media analytics data (e.g., website activities completed, website visitors, registered users, Twitter followers, etc.), transcripts and notes from 36 interviews with representatives of nonprofits, government agencies working with ACTion Alexandria, and members of the leadership team, including the Community Manager, part-time staff, and other members of the ACTion Alexandria steering committee.

We used a mixed-method approach to triangulate and analyze the data. We analyzed, summarized, and visualized website and social media analytics data using Excel 2010, Google Analytics, Facebook Insights, Bitly, and Thrive (for Twitter analytics). We analyzed qualitative data (e.g., notes and transcripts from interviews, open-ended questionnaire responses, website content) using thematic analysis.\(^5\) Once the major themes were identified and analyzed, we were then able to relate them to existing theories and literature in the findings and discussion sections that follow. We shared early drafts of this report highlighting the key findings to key leaders of the ACTion Alexandria initiative who provided insiders’ perspectives on the data and elaborated on issues that needed further elucidation. At no point in the process did ACTion Alexandria leaders discourage the evaluation team from reporting on any of their findings or being candid with limitations related to current approaches.


Limitations

Due to the use of convenience sampling, the results from this study cannot be, and were not intended to be, generalized to a broader population of website users, nonprofits, or city governments. The findings highlight a specific set of experiences that represent a range of ages, group types, and interactions among people and organizations who have engaged with the ACTion Alexandria platform. Although the findings are not generalizable, they are representative of a range of attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors that can inform the design of new online platforms and social media fundraising programs. The findings point to lessons learned and potential best practices that may be transferable across cities and in other civic action brokering environments.

FINDINGS

In the sections that follow, the key findings are organized by stakeholder group and intended outcomes. The combination of quantitative and qualitative evidence for demonstration, practice, or improvement of an outcome is provided along with a description of key successes and challenges illuminated by the research.

Nonprofits

The primary method used to engage with the nonprofits who participated with the ACTion Alexandria projects were interviews (in a few cases, representatives of organizations completed a web form rather than participate in an interview). We conducted 4 interviews in the winter before the project launched, 10 interviews in the spring of 2012, 9 interviews in spring 2013, and received 5 completed web forms in fall 2011 from organizations who participated as featured actions. We also sent out a web-based survey, but the participation during each of the three rounds of the survey was small (Winter 2011: n=19, Fall 2011: n=25, Winter 2013: n=16), making a more quantitative analysis inappropriate for this portion of the study. Additionally, web analytics were used to show their participation on the website.

Type of Engagement by Nonprofits

A total of 145 organizations (i.e., nonprofits) are registered on the site, though only 65 (45%) have ever done something such as post an Action, Blog, or Event. Given the size of Alexandria, this is a significant number of nonprofit organizations (e.g., the city government links to 73 nonprofit organizations, suggesting that the list of 145 provided on the website is much more comprehensive - see http://alexandriava.gov/index_quicklinks.aspx?id=7640). Many organizations were registered by the Community Manager in order to keep the database up-to-date and potentially kick-start their involvement.

Table 2 shows the number of unique organizations that have performed these core activities and the number of activities performed. Overall, there has not been high participation by most organizations. In any given month there is only an average of 7 organizations engaged at all. This is in line with our nonprofit interviews that describe participating in ACTion Alexandria as
“extra work” piled on top of an already busy schedule. When the Community Manager was not actively working with them on a Featured Action or major initiative, most did not go out of their way to post blogs, list events, or post Actions.

### Table 2: Organizations’ participation in website activity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of activity</th>
<th># of orgs who have performed activity</th>
<th># of activities performed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Event</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although the nonprofit organizations did not participate often with ACTion Alexandria, when they did participate alongside the Community Manager on Featured Actions, Challenges, and the Spring2Action event, they were highly engaged and saw significant results. The following sections provide details on these important forms of engagement with the nonprofits.

**Actions & Featured Actions**

The key features of the project that support problem-solving among non-profits were Actions and Featured Actions. Nonprofits could post Actions on the website for community residents to support and complete. Actions typically required small contributions in the form of donations or items from many residents over a short period of time (usually one week) to meet an immediate need. Some Actions requested a single volunteer or small group of volunteers. Featured Actions were posted by the Community Manager or staff member who helped frame the Action in an appropriate way, promote it via social media, the email list, and a prominent spot on the website, and help find matching donors when possible (e.g., the Running Brooke Fund provided matching funds for many of the fundraising Featured Actions). Website visitors see Featured Actions on the homepage and can search for Actions by topic and organization. They can then click on the “Take Action” button which directs them to an Amazon Wishlist or another website with instructions on how to complete the Action. Alternatively, people who find out about the Action via other means (e.g., social media campaigns, email list) may bypass the website altogether and access the nonprofit organization directly. As a result, we believe the number of Actions taken (i.e., people who clicked on the Take Action button) underrepresents the number of people who actually completed the Actions based on our interviews. Fortunately, we have data on how well the Actions were completed from the nonprofits involved in them. As described in detail in what follows, the Featured Actions were very successful, while the regular Actions have been only marginally successful.
A number of factors led to the success of the Featured Actions. We outline these more fully in our previous evaluation reports. Here is a brief synopsis:

- The time and expertise of the Community Manager in helping nonprofits craft an appropriate Action, market it, and help assure its success. Even non-featured Actions posted by the Community Manager solicited nearly 3 times more responses than non-featured Actions posted by others.
- Leveraging social media effectively to get the word out ensured that the broadest audience possible knew about the Action need and were able to participate.
- Creating short time frames for the Actions (typically one to two weeks in duration) helped keep momentum and provide a tangible goal for the organizations to achieve.
- Matching funds from the Running Brooke Fund gave nonprofits the confidence that their efforts in setting up and managing the action would have a worthwhile return on investment and helped motivate contributors.

**Actions & Featured Actions - Successes**

**Having Needs Met and Exceeded Through Featured Actions**

A total of 105 Actions were posted during our time period, resulting in 497 completions. Most of the Actions were not particularly successful, averaging only 4.7 Actions taken (median=1). However, the 16 Featured Actions (15% of all Actions) were very successful, accounting for the majority of Actions taken (63% of all Actions taken). In total the Featured Actions helped solicit 3,920 items (valued at $4,338) and over $10,000 contributed for specific projects (e.g., $2,500 for a toy drive, $1,270 for a coat drive, which includes matching funds). The average number of Featured Action completions was 19.6, while the average for non-Featured Action completions was 2.1. The 16 Featured Actions are shown in Table 3. The majority of them (13) were completed during the first year of the program. Most Actions had a specific goal associated with them (e.g., collect 100 books; raise funds for 30 Home Safety Kits). Table 3 indicates if the goal was met, not met, or exceeded, which we defined as exceeding the original goal by at least 100% (i.e., at least doubling what was originally requested).

As shown in Table 3, all but one Featured Action goal was met, and half of the ones that had goals exceeded the goal by at least double. An example of a very successful Featured Action campaign was a diaper drive for Community Lodgings, a local nonprofit dedicated to helping families exit homelessness through transitional and affordable housing and through youth and adult education programs. Community lodgings sought to raise 640 disposable diapers (a one-month supply) in one week to provide to the families they work with. By the end of the week, community members had donated 2,400 diapers to Community Lodgings, nearly 4 times the requested amount. While the amounts are considerably smaller than the dollars raised as part of Spring2Action (see later section), they were significant to the nonprofits who engaged with

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them and those they served. Most of the nonprofits we interviewed felt that their Featured Action enabled them to accomplish more than they would have on their own (e.g., one nonprofit respondent stated that “[we] generated more donations than a typical email blast or other drive that we would have put together ourselves.”). Several of the Featured Action nonprofits mentioned that they would not have launched a campaign like the one they launched for the Featured Action had it not been for ACTion Alexandria. This was particularly the case because many nonprofits did not have the technological sophistication and experience to perform online action-based initiatives (e.g., one interviewee stated that “[ACTion Alexandria] provided something that we really couldn’t bring to the table.”).

Table 3: Featured Actions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Featured Action (sorted in chronological order of launch)</th>
<th>Actions Taken</th>
<th>Unique Visits</th>
<th>Success Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Month of Milk and After School Snacks for Homeless Children</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>Exceeded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urgent Need for Pedialyte to Prevent Infant Dehydration</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>Exceeded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help Alexandrians struggling with hunger</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diapers for Homeless Families in Transition</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>Exceeded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help Friends of Guest House Raise $500 to Transform Women's Lives</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>Exceeded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pledge To Be A Pinwheel Partner with SCAN</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100 Books Needed for We Are Readers Summer Reading Program</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>277</td>
<td>Met</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support The Center for Alexandria's Children Developmental Playgroups</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>234</td>
<td>Met</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 Baby Home Safety Kits Needed for Healthy Families Alexandria</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>Exceeded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reward 90 Alexandria Higher Achievement Scholars</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>Met</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support the SOHO mentoring program for at-risk pre-teen girls</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>Exceeded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help Computer C.O.R.E. Provide Hope &amp; Opportunities to Low Income Adults</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Not Met</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help 650 Alexandria Children Get A New Toy For The Holidays</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>Exceeded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help Center for Alexandria's Children strengthen homeless families through play</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>Exceeded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help Firefighters Provide 50 Coats for Kids</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>Met</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help More than 650 Alexandria Children Get A New Toy For The Holidays</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>Met</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Reaching New Contributors

ACTion Alexandria helped organizations extend their reach to a larger network of residents via the Featured Action emails and promotion on Facebook and Twitter. This helped the organizations reach their goals quicker while also making more people aware of the organization. Thus, the messages from ACTion Alexandria complemented the work the organizations were already performing via their own outreach methods, which ranged from email lists to social media to on-the-ground outreach via church congregations and events. Organizations that were smaller or less well known for other reasons (e.g., they were new) had the most to gain from being featured, since their existing network was limited. The following comments from two different nonprofits we interviewed illustrate this point:

“We wouldn’t have had the capacity to do it on our own. We don’t have the network of people to put it out to. […] the network of people that connected to it was incredible. We would never have been able to do that. We don’t have that capacity. […] Our listserv is not nearly as pervasive as the one that ACTion Alexandria has.” (Spring 2012 interview)

“The biggest impact was [the Community Manager] being able to get the word out. We just have a sense that more people are aware of us now.” (Spring 2012 interview)

Growing ACTion Alexandria’s Social Network

ACTion Alexandria also extended its own network as a result of the Featured Action mechanism, because the sponsoring organizations helped provide a continual source of new members to the site. Nonprofit organizations promoted their own Actions through whatever existing channels they had including email lists, newsletters, social media accounts, contacts at religious organizations, etc. Inevitably, this reached many people not yet part of ACTion Alexandria. Those who learned about the Action were taken to ACTion Alexandria’s website. Website analytics and registration dates make it clear that Featured Actions account for the majority of the steady, if small, growth in membership throughout the first year. Unfortunately, this model can be difficult to completely enforce, as when nonprofit organizations post a different link to their donation page or when the nature of the Action makes tracking it online difficult (e.g., delivering books in person). There is a balance that must be made between the desire to make Actions as simple as possible to complete and the desire to extend the resident network associated with ACTion Alexandria. Interestingly, people who came to the website first to complete an Action were far more likely to register and use the site again than those who came initially for other reasons such as to vote or comment on a blog post. Thus, having Actions helped attract more active users, though the numbers were overall far fewer than those attracted to the site via other means such as voting on Challenges.
Actions & Featured Actions - Challenges

Competition for Diminishing Resources

When pressed to identify concerns about the platform, nonprofits mentioned competition as a potential issue when interviewed before the launch. For example, some organizations expressed reservations about the idea of Featured Actions because they feared that it might unfairly privilege some organizations over others. Nonprofits often compete for the same scarce resources and, as a broker, ACTion Alexandria has the potential to drive attention and resources to one organization over another. A case study interviewee expressed concerns of “donor burnout” and wondered if all the nonprofits could get what they needed out of “a diminishing or exhausted pot [of funding and resources].”

Though several organizations mentioned concerns about this before the site was launched, they still felt like the opportunities would outweigh the risks, particularly if ACTion Alexandria was fair in the way they chose who to feature. In follow-up interviews, nonprofits indicated that competition had not arisen due to the use of Featured Actions, though we primarily interviewed organizations who had been featured, so it is possible other non-featured organizations felt otherwise.

Members of the ACTion Alexandria steering committee have not seen the competition concern explicitly expressed by nonprofits, but noted that some organizations were hesitant to drive their constituents to the ACTion Alexandria website because of the extra work involved or due to fear of losing their own website traffic. Because the initiative is still new to many people in the community, the demand from nonprofits was not significant, as indicated by the need of the Community Manager to actively solicit nonprofits to partner with on Featured Actions. However, as ACTion Alexandria becomes more prominent, this issue may need to be revisited.

Technical Challenges of Donor Tracking

A second concern about the platform was the difficulty that organizations had using it to track donors or to synchronize their other tracking tools with the information coming in as a result of being a Featured Action. Unfortunately, tracking donors and volunteer time among the variety of organizations and features of the system remains a challenge for the platform. Organizations commented on the challenges that they had trying to combine their current systems (like Amazon.com wishlists) with the ACTion Alexandria platform:

“[We were] not able to track the actual donors. Donors made a donation using Amazon’s wishlist and we did not receive their contact information. When [we] logged in as the administrator [in ACTion Alexandria] we saw names of anyone who clicked on the action, but they did not necessarily purchase a book [for the book drive].” (questionnaire respondent, Fall 2011)
“It was hard to separate the items that were donated as part of the [Featured Action] and those donated as part of the routine donation process that we have. During that week I’d estimate that we got a total of 50 grocery bags of food.” (questionnaire respondent, Fall 2011)

ACTion Alexandria may want to carefully consider the importance of developing tracking technologies that might integrate with common web-based donation tools that organizations and governmental agencies are already using, as this is a key part of a nonprofit’s overall workflow and efforts and may lead to increased adoption of the system over time.

Sustainability of Actions, Featured Actions, and Site Adoption
One downside of using the Featured Action mechanism was that it drew so much attention toward the Actions that were featured that other Actions posted on the site by organizations went largely unnoticed. Non-featured Actions had very few if any respondents (average of 2 responses). Also, some organizations that were used to receiving assistance from the Community Manager in crafting and promoting their Featured Action were not interested in creating their own non-Featured Actions on the site. Indeed, several organizations did not know that Actions and Featured Actions were different.

While additional training and familiarity may alleviate this issue, the prominent use of Featured Actions may obscure the use of regular Actions or set up the expectation that the Community Manager needs to be heavily involved with all Actions leading to sustainability issues down the road. Currently, the limited time of the Community Manager creates a bottleneck that restricts the number of Featured Actions that can be promoted in a given month (e.g., ACTion Alexandria averaged 2 per month during the first year). Additionally, people have a limited amount of attention, which also limits the number of Actions that could be featured even independent of the Community Manager’s time. Training organizations to develop their own successful actions and take on more of the responsibility of running Featured Actions will be essential for the future sustainability and growth of ACTion Alexandria and is something for all civic action brokering platforms to be concerned with. Additionally, providing organizations with mechanisms to target non-Featured Actions to registered users who have interests in their organization may help as well. Currently there is a notification system that allows people to “follow” an organization and get updates such as new Actions tied to the organization, but it is not widely promoted or used as it requires extra effort from the user to set up.

Community Challenges
A core activity of the project that supported collaboration outcomes among nonprofits and city residents were Community Challenges. The idea of Community Challenges deployed through the ACTion Alexandria platform was, in part, to encourage voices that are otherwise unheard at city meetings to participate in the local civic discourse. Another goal was to work on projects that span more than a single nonprofit organization. In a Community Challenge, the Community Manager, in conjunction with the local nonprofits and/or government agencies, identified problems or issues that could benefit from community input. The Community Challenge was posted to the website and disseminated through outreach online and offline. Residents could
then share their ideas for solutions on the website and then vote to help identify the best (i.e. most popular) submitted ideas. The Community Manager followed up after the voting period and took steps to engage the top ideas.

During our evaluation, ACTion Alexandria ran 17 challenges (Table 4), which solicited 288 ideas from 124 different people (avg of 17 ideas per challenge), 200 comments on those ideas, and 7,707 votes. The first 10 challenges were part of the same project where participants commented and voted on community quality of life indicators in various categories (e.g., Diversity, Health Care), which were posted by the Community Manager. Later community challenges solicited ideas from residents, not only votes.

**Table 4: ACTion Alexandria Community Challenges**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenge Name (sorted in chronological order of launch)</th>
<th>Submitted Ideas</th>
<th>Votes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Community, Helping One Another, Basic Needs*</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity*</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Care*</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation, Trails, Parks, Open Space, Recreation*</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Safety, Crime, Emergency Preparedness &amp; Response*</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional and Mental Health*</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substance Abuse and Prevention*</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthy, Safe, and Accessible Food*</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clean City and Environment*</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment Opportunity*</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Do We Increase Local Giving in Alexandria?</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enter &quot;Keep It 360&quot; Video Contest</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>542</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Play Spruce Up Grants</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>4,409</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greener Alexandria</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>827</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask City Council Candidates!</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What's Next, Alexandria? A Community Conversation about Civic Engagement &amp; Planning for the Future</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring for Kids Grant Challenge</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>812</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Part of the community quality of life indicators initiative
Community Challenges varied dramatically in the number of ideas and votes they solicited. The ones that generated the most activity were tied to a competition for grant funding or cash awards. For example, the Challenge with the most participation had residents nominate a playground that would receive a $15,000 Spruce Up grant from Project Play, an initiative put together by the Community Manager and several local organizations, with the goal of ensuring that every child in Alexandria had a quality space to play. A total of 22 ideas were submitted by residents who posted detailed descriptions and photos demonstrating why a particular playground warranted the grant and included photos to help tell the story. The leading ideas received over 1,000 votes, helping identify potential playgrounds with wide community support. The 3 other Challenges with over 500 votes were also competitions where the winners would receive grant funding or cash prizes to support their ideas.

Our analysis and input from the Community Manager helped identify several key characteristics of the Challenges that generated the most citizen engagement:

- They relate to topics that many residents care passionately about such as their own neighborhood playground or the environment.
- They have an explicit “winner” based on who receives the most community votes. The winner may receive grant funding. Or, as in the case of the Ask City Council Candidates! Challenge, the winning idea (i.e., question for a local candidate) was selected to be asked during a local political debate.
- They are sponsored by a project that spans multiple organizations and focuses on a social issue rather than a specific organization (e.g., childhood obesity, teen pregnancy, or affordable housing).
- Challenges last longer on the site (e.g., 1-2 months) and culminate in a week-long voting period by members.

Running a successful community challenge that solicits good ideas and significant participation is extremely difficult, particularly when an initiative is relatively young, such as ACTion Alexandria. A few factors were critical to creating an environment where thousands of individuals within a relatively small community would cast their vote. These are outlined more fully in our earlier evaluation and include:

- The ACTion Alexandria Management Team serves as a network hub for nonprofit communities in Alexandria. They have a panoramic view of some of the common needs of the community that helps them generate Challenges that appeal to many nonprofits and individuals. For example, the Management Team and Community Manager helped broker a relationship between 3 groups that had not worked closely before until the Project Play challenge. Their partnership has continued as part of the Project Play Task Force. Nonprofit interviewees stated that “we’ve learned a lot about additional community collaborations that we didn’t know of before” and “I think that ACT for Alexandria has kind of really fostered this idea of collaboration.”
• The Community Manager was able to scope and frame Challenges in a way that resonated with residents and generated enthusiasm for ideas in an online setting. Nonprofits working on Challenges talk about working closely with the Community Manager who helps “translate” ideas to a form that will work well in the online environment. They describe the Community Manager as “amazing”, “delightful to work with”, “helpful and accommodating”, “knowledgeable about social media” and “willing to share.” This positive working relationship and, at times, reliance on the Community Manager for expertise in online social engagement was critical.

**Community Challenges - Successes**

**Increased Funding**

Community Challenges increased the total community investment by bringing in additional grant money. For example, $92,500 in grant money was raised for the Project Play initiative and thousands more were raised for other initiatives (e.g., $20,000 for the Caring for Kids Grant Challenge). While some of this funding may have been distributed in the absence of ACTion Alexandria, the platform provided a public space that helped galvanize energy around topics and raise additional funds beyond the $60,000 originally pledged for the Challenge. Indeed, one funder mentioned that the “grant-making process” was the reason they became involved with ACTion Alexandria and “what's important to me.” This funder wanted to work with ACTion Alexandria because “they helped me realize the need. It’s a ton of fun to satisfy immediate needs.” Thus, the visibility of the giving that happens via Challenges with grant awards has the potential to increase the total number of dollars donated.

**Providing Social Media Expertise and an Engagement Platform**

Several nonprofits mentioned that without ACTion Alexandria they would not have had the expertise or technical platform to solicit as much input from others online. Many nonprofits said they were not savvy enough to use social media to effectively engage with users, though they recognized the importance of doing so. Because Community Challenges require significant participation in order to be successful, strategic campaigning through social media greatly increases the word-of-mouth communication about the challenge and drives people to the website, which itself provides a unique platform for idea generation. In this way, ACTion Alexandria fills a critical gap for its community of nonprofit and government agencies, as stated by interviewees:

“If ACTion Alexandria did not exist, we would not have done the [Community Challenge].... That's something that we came up with as a way to really engage the public in. ...I just truly am not good at the social marketing stuff...and [the Community Manager] is really good at it. ...I don't have any sort of platform or forum that I would be able to host this kind of thing...I think that this is probably much more successful than whatever we would have come up with.” (Spring 2012 interview)

“If we didn’t have ACTion Alexandria I’m not even sure if we would have done it - because it would have been too difficult for us.” (Summer 2013 interview)
Soliciting Input from Different People than Other Methods

Gathering ideas and comments online provides access to people who may be hard to reach via other means, such as in-person community meetings. One interviewee described how the information that was gathered via ACTion Alexandria was more likely to be from experts than the information they gathered from in-person meetings: “Alexandria is unique in that we have so many experts on different topics… More of those experts participated on ACTion Alexandria than in the in-person meetings, which included a broader set of people.” The online, asynchronous communication available via ACTion Alexandria supports those with a busy schedule who cannot necessarily attend in-person meetings at a specific time, yet still want to express their feelings.

Growing the Community

Overall, Challenges were directly responsible for the vast majority of registered members on the ACTion Alexandria site. Most registered users joined the site as a result of a Challenge that was running. By far, the most common form of initial engagement was voting. Unfortunately, most users who initially came to the site to vote did not participate in any other activities on the site (88%). And only 33% of them joined the ACTion email list, compared to 55% of those who came to the site initially to complete an Action. Those joining to vote were also less likely to participate in the site again later. However, because so many users initially came to the site to vote, there are 4.5 times more email list members that came initially to vote than who came initially to complete an Action. Though only 12% of those who initially came to ACTion to vote participated again, they account for 37% of users who participated in at least two activities. In summary, Challenges helped scale up the membership more than any other activity on the site, and though only a small percentage of them stayed involved, in real numbers they were significant.

Raising Awareness among Residents

The benefit of a Community Challenge in particular is that it allows organizations to get input from residents early in a project and build an audience around an issue that might not otherwise exist. Not only are Community Challenges useful for getting the word out about ACTion Alexandria and increasing its membership, but they are useful for raising awareness about social issues in the community. The following comment from an interviewee involved in the Project Play challenge highlights this finding:

“The awareness piece is raised and we have at least some audience to spread information out about our play equipment and sort of the next steps… It will be interesting to see whether and how we can mobilize that to a greater degree… It’s another forum for spreading information to the public.” (Summer 2013 interview)
Community Challenges - Challenges

Non-representative Sample of Participants
Contributors to ACTion Alexandria are not necessarily representative of the general population, which may be problematic for some idea generation and voting activities. One interviewee contrasted the types of comments that were received online with those that were received in community events held in person: “People tended to go to areas that they were more interested in on ACTion Alexandria...When we had public forums we could walk them through the entire thing, but it was more selective online. It would be nice to have people comment on the whole thing, but that’s harder in the online environment.” (Summer 2013). Additionally, in Challenges where funds are awarded to those with the most votes there is a risk that people will cheat by creating fake accounts etc., though no evidence of this was found at ACTion Alexandria.

Lack of Scalability
The current model has relied heavily on the role of the Community Manager who acts as a gatekeeper. As discussed, this assures high quality since the Community Manager helped organizations “succinctly describe what we were doing in an online environment.” (Summer 2013). However, relying on a single Community Manager to take on too many responsibilities may lead to burnout or a lack of scalability. One observer noted that the Community Manager “had to do all the online stuff for the nonprofits” and “that approach just doesn’t scale.” Until the nonprofit groups have more online experience though, it may be risky to allow any of them to post Challenges that may not meet a minimum quality control. Having a single person posting all Challenges raises the possibility that some ideas will not be given a chance due to the whims of a single individual or group. So far this has not been raised as an issue by any of our interviewees, but as the site becomes more popular it may become problematic if organizations cannot create their own Challenges.

Spring2ACTion
A key component of the project that led to increased engagement among nonprofits was the Spring2ACTion city-wide fundraising event. Since 2004, ACT for Alexandria has been promoting philanthropic activity through training and helping organize the nonprofit and government sector in Alexandria. The Spring2ACTion event brings together nonprofits and local businesses to network, share best practices, and teach new skills such as how to effectively use social media in a fundraising campaign. Those skills are then put into action during a competitive, community-wide fundraising drive. The first Spring2ACTion event occurred in the spring of 2011 over three days. Based on experiences from that first year, the team shortened the event to one concentrated 24-hour period of micro-fundraising and increased friendly competition between nonprofits for raising the most money throughout the day by providing matching funds for those in the lead.

The ACTion Alexandria website was not originally anticipated to serve this function, and therefore the project used Razoo (http://www.razoo.com/), a third-party nonprofit fundraising tool to manage the contributions themselves. The ACTion Alexandria website and social media sites were used to promote the event, interact with participants, and show live results (which were
also available on Razoo). Due to its success, the project has become a key effort of the overall ACTion Alexandria platform over the last years and there are opportunities for thinking about how it might be implemented through future iterations of the website.

Each year the event has been successful, with a significant increase in funds raised as ACTion Alexandria and nonprofits have gained more experience in online fundraising. In 2011, the first year the event was run by ACTion Alexandria, a total of $104,156 was raised for 48 participating organizations (avg of $2,170 per organization). In 2012, using the new 24-hr event approach, a total of 69 participating nonprofits raised $274,288 with an additional $80,000 in matching donations (avg of $5,135 per organization). In 2013, the number of participating organizations increased to 97 with a total of $546,369 raised with an additional $114,000 in matching donations (avg of $7,979 per organization). Even organizations who walked into the event without a clear plan were surprised at how well they were able to do in just one day.

There are a number of key components of the Spring2ACTion event that interview participants felt contributed to its success:

- The event is local to Alexandria, which allows for a targeted demographic and streamlined ‘ask’ message.
- Sponsors and sponsor prizes “sweeten the pot”. They motivate residents to participate feeling like they can ‘stretch their dollars’ and give the nonprofits a series of specific goals to focus on throughout the day. One interviewee from 2013 stated that the idea that “we can ask somebody to just donate ten dollars to help us win eighteen thousand dollars was huge.”
- A single 24-hour fundraising campaign creates a sense of urgency and energy in the community.
- Pre-event training sessions are especially helpful for first-time participating nonprofits and groups who are less familiar with social media and how to leverage it in a fundraising context.
- The event is successful for organizations new to social media as well as those who are more advanced with online fundraising.
- Spring2ACTion is one of the only online-focused fundraising events that organizations do, so it fills an important and growing niche area of their development efforts.
- The event evokes a spirit of friendly competition that is motivating to all who participate and maintains a sense of urgency throughout the 24-hr period. All of the interviewees had a positive feeling toward the “win-win” nature of the competition (e.g., “Even though it has a competitive aspect to it, it’s really a collaborative effort and a joint success”). The leaderboards that Razoo provides (and makes available via a widget on ACTion Alexandria’s site) were key to promoting the excitement of the competition.

Despite its successes, the platform still has some challenges to overcome as it continues to expand and serve an increasingly more diverse population of participating nonprofits. Below is a list of key themes and detailed descriptions from the interviews that highlight Spring2ACTion’s successes and challenges within the outcome category of engagement.
**Spring2ACTion - Successes**

**Meeting and exceeding goals**

Most of the organizations we spoke with met or exceeded their fundraising goals through Spring2ACTion. Groups who were participating for the first time were especially impressed by how effective a social media fundraising campaign could be in comparison to other fundraising efforts they participated in (i.e. bake sales).

“Well, we were blown away. Initially we thought if we could raise $10,000 it would be fabulous. We ended up raising close to $33,000 online…. Which, of course, you know for a group that’s all volunteer and none of us are professionals, that’s just unbelievable really.” (Spring 2013 interview)

The 24-hour campaign approach was particularly successful at meeting organizations’ concerns about time and effort, a precious commodity in the nonprofit sector. By dedicating just one day to the event, organizations were able to get the word out, manage their leaderboards, and achieve their goals. As one organization summarized it: “It is fantastic. For one day? For us? We made 12 thousand dollars. It was unheard of,” (Spring 2012 interview).

We spoke to a few organizations who were not as successful in the 2012 or 2013 Spring2ACTion events. In all cases the organizations felt that their lack of success had more to do with their own efforts than anything about the event itself. One challenge that will likely continue to affect the sustainability of the project over time is competition with other fundraising events that nonprofits hold as part of their annual development efforts. We discuss this in more detail in the Challenges section below.

**Engaging new donors**

The localness and personal nature of the project was seen as more effective than a broader fundraising effort like DC’s Give to the Max day (now referred to as Do More 24), because it allowed organizations to connect with their volunteers and network of donors. Organizations felt that they were able to target a known demographic more specifically than a broader campaign would have allowed them to do. Through those networks they were able to reach out to a broader community of donors (friends of friends). In most cases (though not all), larger donations tended to come from known donors, but smaller donations ($10-100) often came from new donors. Nearly all of the interviewees described reaching new donors through the event:

“I think we had a fair number of young people and they were ten dollar contributions and 25 dollar contributions which is great. It is a way to get them informed to start being a little more philanthropic. …I can honestly say that 50 percent [of our Spring2ACTion donors] were new donors.” (Spring 2012 interview)

“We received about 40 new donors out of 135 donations due to our partnership with Spring2Action. …[The new donors] probably contributed about the same amount as
the other ones, though the most significant amounts (e.g., over $1,000) were donors who we had existing relationships with.” (Spring 2012 interview)

“I think just the fact that we were using those personal networks and those are people that we, for the most part, probably did not consider to be prospective donors…It helped us to discover new people for sure… . And actually 96% of our staff actually made a donation to our organization on that day.” (Spring 2013 interview)

Raising awareness of other nonprofits
As a result of the large number of nonprofits in the city of Alexandria, it is a challenge for nonprofits to know about other organizations and learn about their missions, particularly for newer organizations to the city. One unique outcome of the event was the degree to which the event helped raise awareness in and among the nonprofit organizations. Through the leaderboard and through participation in pre-event training sessions/boot camps interview participants described learning about new organizations outside of their immediate domain (e.g. an arts organization that someone from the health and human services domain was unaware of before the event). This was especially true of organizations who performed particularly well, they had the most time in the spotlight on the leaderboards and top performers from 2012 gave talks during the pre-event workshops in 2013 further elevating their profile.

“Alexandria is a pretty small city. It is very close-knit so you are almost vying with these other organizations from the same people. So I think it was nice to sort of come together and just meet the other people, learn about what their missions are, what they – a lot of them had specific projects.” (Spring 2012 interview)

“…and especially with the addition of the first time participant leader board, there’s definitely a ton of organizations that participate that I've never heard of. But they obviously have, you know, a lot of support to be able to make it on to those leader boards.” (Spring 2013 interview)

For the most part, interview participants simply described a new awareness of organizations and did not describe intentions for collaborating. In a few instances, however, groups mentioned that they had people at the workshops who they planned on following up with to engage in a partnership or project with. Although this was rare, it highlights a potential that future Spring2ACTion workshops can consider adding to the agenda.

Building capacity for social media fundraising among nonprofits
For organizations who were less tech savvy, Spring2ACTion was an opportunity to learn new skills, gain experience with a new form of fundraising, and attempt to reach a different target audience (in most people’s minds, they assumed they would reach a younger audience). The pre-event workshops, office hours with the community management team, and event toolkits all ensured that even the least experienced fundraiser could make the most of the day.
“I had no idea what to expect. This was all brand new to me, fundraising online. And I think it went well. I think I learned a few tricks of the trade for next time out.” (Spring 2012 interview)

“To have free training like that is fantastic, especially when you work in a non-profit because we have no budget.” (Spring 2013 interview)

“…online fundraising is something that we are definitely taking and looking to expand upon. I am not sure that we have a plan necessarily, but we are excited for the opportunity and just knowing that we have those people that are willing to support us on this project. …because we have seen it can be successful.” (Spring 2013 interview)

For those organizations who already felt equipped with social media fundraising and communication skills, the pre-event workshops were useful for learning about the new features and functions of the Razoo page and to find out key information regarding dates and logistics. These individuals felt it would useful in the future, especially as other organizations become more comfortable with the event, to dedicate one day to the logistical information and leave the other two days for those who needed the social media training.

Spring2ACTion - Challenges

Competition with other fundraising events

Although the friendly competition of the leaderboards was seen as a positive aspect of the event, the competition that the organizations faced internally with overlap among their various spring fundraising activities was the most frequently cited challenge of Spring2ACTion. Spring is a busy time period for nonprofits in Alexandria. Many of the organizations we spoke with described the importance of holding their major fundraisers in the spring before school let out and the summer vacation season began, and also during the winter holiday season. The biggest concerns were related to over-asking and donor fatigue.

“The timing of it – I don’t know that there’s a better time but at every year we kind of think “Wow...how are we going to merge this with our other issues.”” (Spring 2012 interview)

“we were definitely worried about over-asking and donor fatigue because we had so many different things that we were trying out there. When I found out the date for Spring2Action I really had to sit down and re-work the editorial calendar and the e-mail calendar…. we actually did hit all of our goals [for each event] and we did exceed most of them.” (Spring 2013 interview)
Sustainability: Shifting the effort from nonprofits to city residents

One challenge of Spring2ACTion is the extent to which it can continually scale each year. There is a maximum number of organizations in the city that will eventually sign up to participate and this could have a plateauing effect on the continued success of the event over time.

“I don’t know at what point there are diminishing returns, you know, I think we could at least get one more really good year out of it. I don’t know when the fatigue sets in. I don’t think we can to it too often.” (Spring 2012 interview)

Alternative methods are needed for garnering support from others and reaching out to networks beyond those of the nonprofits themselves. One way that ACTion Alexandria has begun to think about this is through increasing the role of city residents in the event as individual fundraisers.

In the first couple years of the event, there was an option to participate as an individual, but this was not well advertised. Spring2ACTion 2013 was the first year that it was promoted more heavily. An individual could create his or her own page (e.g. Derek’s Fundraising Page) and set a fundraising goal. There was a separate leaderboard specifically for individuals and they could win a separate set of prizes and incentives.

Several organizations recruited their volunteers for the effort or divided up employees within their organization and created an internal competition to encourage people to reach out to their personal networks. This is a promising approach, but one that requires additional resources for the organizations to train the individuals or to provide separate training through ACTion Alexandria to support those folks. Organizations who did not use this tactic commented that they felt like recruiting individuals and training them on the event was time consuming, but saw the value of it as something to pursue with more thought in the future.

“I sort of got the gist of what it was but explaining the separate fundraising -- They have got that Razoo and you can do it on your page but you can actually establish your own fundraiser...I could not even comprehend getting that message out to my people.” (Spring 2012 interview)

Additional approaches to scaling the event include incorporating more participation from local businesses: “[ACTion Alexandria] did raise a lot of money this year. I'm not sure how much more they can squeeze out of the community in a day but definitely more community partnerships,” (Spring 2013 interview).

Despite these concerns, the fact that the amount raised and number of participating organizations has dramatically increased each year, suggests that the giving cap for a single event may not yet have been reached.
Technical difficulties of a third-party platform

A third key challenge raised by interview participants each year was the challenge of using the Razoo platform. In particular, organizations had trouble explaining to their donor base that they needed donations specifically on the day of the event, or scheduled through Razoo for that date.

“Our biggest challenge was communicating the ability to schedule a donation to an audience that is not very computer savvy. We had a lot of donations come in before the day because people made a mistake with that function….we got the most complaints from our contacts about that and probably lost the most potential [matching] money because of that” (Spring 2013 interview)

A second concern with the platform was related to being able to track and learn more about the new donors who participated. As one participant explained, “...to be honest, it is hard to tell -- unless they are somebody who is already in our fold -- what their demographics are,” (Spring 2013 interviews). This information is important to development teams at nonprofits as they build their fundraising strategy.

Addressing the technical challenges and gaps of Razoo is an opportunity for the ACTion Alexandria platform. Future development of the site could include additional features tied to Spring2ACTion (e.g., getting people to register for the site and gathering their contact information for the nonprofits they donate to) by building out the tool as a social media fundraising platform, though this would change the direction of the project from a focus on direct citizen engagement and action to a more mediated approach via the nonprofits.

Local Government

The primary methods used to engage with members of the local government were interviews conducted before and after the launch of the project. We spoke with individuals from the Communications and Health and Human Services departments as well as those involved with key aspects of planning and oversight for ACTion Alexandria. We also asked nonprofits to reflect on the extent to which they thought the government was or should be included in ACTion Alexandria.

The local city government has partially supported ACTion Alexandria financially since its inception and has partnered with them more closely this past year. Those we spoke to in the city government were aware of the significant amounts of funding raised as a result of Spring2Action. Some, but not all, were also aware of gains that their nonprofit partners received, such as new collaborative partnerships that led to meaningful change including the Project Play taskforce and grants. ACTion Alexandria also helped promote public city events through events and blog posts shared on their website. However, during the first two years of the project, despite periodic attempts to partner directly, there were not any Actions or Challenges directly tied to the city government. As the city has recognized the importance of reaching out to its constituents in new ways, direct collaboration has begun, though its future is still unclear.
This past year, the city partnered with ACTion Alexandria to help solicit feedback on an initiative called “What’s Next Alexandria?” - a “community conversation about civic engagement and planning for the future and how Alexandrians can best participate in the public decisions that shape the City” (see www.alexandriava.gov/WhatsNext). ACTion Alexandria helped run an online survey on their website, promoted and participated in several in-person meetings (via blogs, email, and social media), and a Challenge that solicited 6 ideas and 33 votes. The most popular idea recommended allowing residents to provide comments and votes on city topics via online and mobile tools. While overall, participation in the online Challenge was relatively low, the number and quality of the 11 comments responding to the top idea suggest that there is untapped potential for reaching new people via online tools. The outreach efforts of ACTion Alexandria likely contributed to the high number of people filling out the survey and attending the physical events, though the city’s own outreach efforts seem to have attracted more people (e.g., 459 people came from the gov site, while 173 came from the ACTion Alexandria site). The result of this partnership was the creation of Alexandria’s Draft Civic Engagement Handbook, which is open for comment until October of 2013 and may help lay the groundwork for future collaborations between the city government and ACTion Alexandria, among other related initiatives.

Another Challenge sponsored by ACTion Alexandria suggests the potential for meaningful partnerships. ACTion Alexandria, who is non-partisan, partnered with the Alexandria Democratic Committee to solicit questions from residents for the final Democratic primary debate between City Council members. There were a total of 25 Ideas, 157 votes, and over a thousand unique site visitors, suggesting an interest in finding ways to engage the public in local city politics. Overall, the submitted Ideas and comments were written in an appropriate tone as the Community Manager had described. This initial attempt suggests potential opportunities to partner with the city and/or potential city candidates in new ways.

Although the city government has helped fund and been involved with ACTion Alexandria in the past year, there are many unanswered questions about how to most effectively make such a partnership work. There seems to be a general recognition that there is untapped potential, but concerns about how to tap that potential in a way that is effective and appropriate.

On the one hand, several nonprofit and government employees like the fact that ACTion Alexandria is distinct from the city government. One organization mentioned how they “kinda like that ACTion Alexandria is not government,” because “people have varying levels of satisfaction with the local government” (Spring 2012 interview). Another interviewee saw too tight a collaboration as potentially inefficient and not core to the original mission of ACTion Alexandria. There was concern that ACTion Alexandria may become an outsourced city agency or surrogate and in the process draw too many resources away from the problem solving and idea generation that it was originally founded to support.

On the other hand, several people saw the need, or at least potential, for closer collaboration. One city employee mentioned that the close working relationship with the Community Manager on the “What’s Next Alexandria?” initiative was very effective, though future partnerships would
depend heavily on the person who fills the Community Manager role. Another issue raised is that people may be less likely to post to ACTion Alexandria because it’s not a city site and it’s not clear to people that their voice will be heard by the city. Indeed, currently, posts to ACTion Alexandria are not responded to (or possibly heard) by city employees since their involvement with ACTion Alexandria has not been formally established. For example, some Ideas discussed adding new bike lanes and changing the law to allow chicken hens in residential areas. Even Ideas posted to the “What’s Next Alexandria?” Challenge were not responded to by city employees on the ACTion Alexandria site. Though it’s not clear yet exactly what a stronger partnership would look like, some assurance that Ideas shared on ACTion Alexandria are heard by city employees, and potentially responded to, seems important. For example, a community moderator may flag relevant posts to invite a city official to respond.

In summary, ACTion Alexandria’s independence from the city government is desirable to many, yet there seems to be a desire to explore ways of more effectively partnering on certain initiatives, particularly initiatives that require city involvement. This is something that another grant could support as it would require thoughtful care and opportunities for testing and iteration to figure out how to do it properly. Now that the city has developed their rules of engagement and the city and ACTion Alexandria have demonstrated meaningful collaboration, we believe it would be an ideal time to explore new models of collaboration. The most popular Idea posted to the “What’s Next Alexandria?” Challenge, which was heavily commented on by others, suggests the importance of making such a partnership work:

**Online & Mobile (Idea Submission)**  
*Submitted by Nicole Gauvin on Thu, 09/20/2012 - 3:02pm*

Attending a meeting at city hall means blocking out a large chunk of time in your schedule, finding child care, looking for parking, sitting in a room full of people you don’t know, and then waiting for the ONE issue you’re interested in to be brought up. For greater participation, the City of Alexandria should encourage people to take part when they have the time. By allowing people to provide input and actually vote on issues online and via mobile (in addition to current methods), you have a better chance of increasing community involvement. Which could mean a few minutes instead of an hour or more commitment.

**City Residents**

The primary methods we used to engage with city residents in the evaluation were surveys, website analytics, social network analysis, and content analysis of posts and comments on the website. Web and site analytics cover the time period from February 1, 2011 to August 15, 2013. The ACT team helped the evaluation team disseminate a web-based survey to city residents in the community at three different points in time. A baseline study was conducted just before the launch of the project in February 2011. We received responses from n=122 partial and completed survey responses from residents, who ACT reached out to via listservs and social media. We conducted two additional surveys in the October 2011 and February 2013. These surveys were sent to registered users of the site. However, survey response was low.
(October 2011: n=32, February 2013: n=36) making quantitative comparative analyses inappropriate. We considered conducting interviews with city residents, but were concerned about oversampling and leaned on data from the website analytics and content analysis to try and address this gap. We direct readers to the baseline report dated March 2011, which provides a summary of the pre-launch baseline survey, and note the findings related directly to the city residents are limited.

**Participation Statistics**

Since the launch of ACTion Alexandria, nearly 37,000 unique visitors (i.e., unique visits from a specific device/browser combination) have made 56,000 unique visits to the site and viewed over 200,000 pages. Approximately 35% of visitors have been back multiple times. As expected, the most popular cities that visitors connect from are Alexandria, Washington, Arlington, and surrounding cities. Visitors come from a variety of sources, including search traffic (34%), direct traffic from a desktop email client, bookmarks, or entering a URL directly into a browser (32%), referral traffic from following a link on another website (28%), and ACTion Alexandria email link campaigns (6%). Compared to other sites, the search traffic is much lower, suggesting that people find the site from referrals, emails, and personal contacts much more than they find it on their own on search engines. ACTion Alexandria’s Facebook account has 631 Likes (i.e., followers) and their Twitter account (@ActionAlexVA) has 2,011 Followers. For comparison, the city of Alexandria has 9,765 Facebook Likes and 7,222 Twitter Followers.

Those who visited ACTion Alexandria’s website participated in all of the major activities on the site as shown in Table 5. The Challenges section of the site, where people post Ideas and vote on them was the most popular portion of the site. It also led to many return visits. Blogs were also very popular, though blog readers rarely participated in the site in other ways and most visitors did not return again to the site. Actions were less common, but like Challenges, it led to many return visits. Events, like blogs, were visited by people once and did not prompt many visitors to return to the site again.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Website Section</th>
<th>Page Views</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Challenges</td>
<td>33,992</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blogs</td>
<td>33,619</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Page</td>
<td>29,680</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actions</td>
<td>24,236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Events</td>
<td>12,585</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As expected, participation in the site was very bursty, with heavy activity centering around a specific Challenge or Action, which were often accompanied by a corresponding Blog post and/or Event.
Analytics from the website’s database provides more details on the 3,701 registered users and how they engaged with the site. Figure 3 shows the number of users registered on the site over time. The slow, steady gains (e.g., until 12/07/2011) are a result of users registering in order to participate in Actions, which were the emphasis of the program the first year. The large spike of nearly 1,500 registrations in January 2012 is due to the Project Play initiative and voting, which is discussed in the Challenges section in detail. Additional large spikes are due to other popular Challenges.

![Registered Users Over Time](image)

**Figure 3**: Number of Registered Users over Time.

A few optional demographic questions are asked of those who register for the site. Of the 65% of registered users who provided gender data, 68% were female. This is higher than the 52% of female residents in Alexandria, VA according to the most recent census. The age distribution of the 55% of registered users who reported it closely mirrored that of the most recent census. Race/ethnicity information, filled out by 54% of registered users, was not as representative when compared to census data. It showed that 80% of registered users were white, while only 61% of the population of Alexandria is white. Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, and Asian were all underrepresented by at least half. Other research shows that nationally those most likely to participate in civic activities both on and offline tend to have higher education and income levels (see [http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2013/Civic-Engagement.aspx](http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2013/Civic-Engagement.aspx)). Whatever the underlying cause, it is clear that the racial diversity of Alexandria is not fully represented on the site.
Of the 3,701 registered users, 1,987 (54%) contributed in some way (e.g., posted a comment, voted, completed an action) and 1,521 (41%) signed up for the email list. Of those who contributed, 76% only completed one activity. Table 6 shows the number of unique individuals who participated in various activities, as well as the total number of times the activities were completed. Table 7 shows the number of people that participate at different activity levels. The observed pattern is common among user-generated sites, where many people participate rarely and a few participate very frequently. In this case, the most active participants were often affiliated with ACTion Alexandria, ACT, or other nonprofit organizations.

Table 6: Participation by type of activity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Unique Contributors</th>
<th>Activities Completed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Actions Taken</td>
<td>280</td>
<td>497</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog Posts</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>416</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comments on Blog, Action, or Idea</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>314</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideas Submitted</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>288</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Votes Cast</td>
<td>1,735</td>
<td>7,707</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7: Participation levels of users

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity Level</th>
<th>Number of Users</th>
<th>Percent of Total Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Highly Active (5 or more activities)</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active (2-4 activities)</td>
<td>418</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less Active (1 activity)</td>
<td>1,509</td>
<td>40.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passive (0 activities)</td>
<td>1,714</td>
<td>46.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A network analysis was completed that mapped users to types of participation on the website. Figure 4 shows the results of the analysis, based on data from February, 2013. It shows, as discussed earlier, that most users engage with a single activity (dark blue circles), especially voting and actions. Those who participated in just two activities (light blue circles) typically voted as one of their activities. A core, but small, group of individuals completed 3 or more different types of activities. Those core members typically engaged in each type of activity multiple times, as indicated by the thicker edges (lines) connected to the user.
Figure 4: Users (circles) are connected to each type of activity they performed. Thicker edges (gray connecting lines) indicate that users completed the activity more times than thinner edges. Color indicates the number of different types of activities a user engaged in (e.g., dark blue = 1 activity; light blue = 2 activities; dark green = 3 activities; light green = 4 activities; orange = 5 activities).

A separate analysis was performed to see how people differed in their activity level based on the type of activity they initially came to the site to perform. Those who came to complete an Action were more likely to register for the email list (55%), as were those who came initially to post a blog (56%), when compared to those coming initially to post an idea (40%) or vote on an idea (33%). However, because there were so many more people that voted than people that took Actions or posted blogs, there were nearly 4 times as many people on the email list as a result of coming to vote than as a result of coming to complete an Action. A similar analysis shows that those who came initially to complete an Action were far more likely to become Highly Active than those who came initially to vote, but because so many people came to vote, they had the same number of people in the Highly Active category.
Content Analysis of Website Comments
To better understand the contributions made by residents, we performed a content analysis of comments on blog posts, Ideas, and comments left on ideas. The Ideas posted by city residents received the most responses. Out of 278 Ideas, 53 received responses in the form of comments (mean=3.8, median=2, mode=1, min=1/max=23). The topics that received the most responses (10 or more comments) were:

1. Alexandria Police Youth Camp (23 responses, 162 up votes, 6/28/2013)
2. The Thinking Tree Reading Garden Project (16 responses, 301 up votes, 12/29/2011)
3. Pedestrian- and Bicycle-Friendly Infrastructure (12 responses, 45 up votes, 5/1/2012)
4. Nomination for the NEW Beverly Hills Church/Preschool Play Space (12 responses, 1,036 up votes, 12/13/2011)
5. Online and mobile (11 responses, 20 up votes, 9/20/2012)
6. Allow Chicken Hens Back into Alexandria (10 responses, 113 up votes, 3/1/2012)

Because these posts were associated with Challenges, which required people to vote for the Ideas they supported, it is not surprising that the primary content of the responses are related to voting and supporting the Idea presented. These top Ideas represent children’s welfare (Police Youth Camp, Thinking Tree Reading Garden, and Preschool Play Space), Ideas associated with the popular Project Play Spruce Up Grant Challenge (Thinking Tree Reading Garden, Preschool Play Space), biking in the city, and two government-related posts (Online and Mobile and Allow Chicken Hens Back). They are reflective of similar topics across the dataset that received few or no responses, suggesting that existing networks or face to face recruitment had more to do with the higher rates of participation for some Ideas more than topic. In addition to these themes, a wide range of other topics emerged showcasing the breadth of city residents’ interests and concerns as well as the flexibility of the Ideas feature for accommodating a wide variety of perspectives with its blog-like functionality.

Blog posts received fewer responses on average than the Challenges/Ideas did. The majority of blog posts were initiated by members of the ACT team or a member of a nonprofit organization in the city. Out of 416 blog posts, 52 received responses (mean=0.22, median=0, mode=0, min=1/max=23). The most popular blog entry was “Help Us Pick Our Logo!” with 23 responses posted before the official launch of the site. Given the general popularity of voting on the site, it makes sense that this topic engaged people and gave them something concrete to respond to. The majority of the remaining blog entries that came from the ACT team were also disseminated via the email listserv, which may have had a high readership, though they did not garner significant site participation.

To summarize, ACTion Alexandria was able to attract tens of thousands of visitors to the site, thousands of registered users, and only dozens of highly active participants. Most contributors came to the site to perform a single action (e.g., vote, post an Idea, complete an Action) and never participated again, though some of them (41%) did request more information via the email list. As a result, the ACTion Alexandria website served more as a series of calls to action then it did a civic engagement community. While it may not be necessary for a thriving engagement
community to exist, several interviewees felt that having a more engaged community would help improve all of the desirable outcomes associated with the project. However, developing such a community is not trivial, particularly given that many residents already participate in a local email list or Facebook group that, at least partially, fill this need. It is also not clear that the current technical infrastructure of the website supports such a community.

**Twitter Network Analysis**

To better understand how ACTion Alexandria fits within the Alexandria community, we conducted an analysis of their Twitter network as of February 12, 2013. The analysis examines the relationships between all 1,709 Twitter accounts that Follow or are Followed By @ActionAlexVA. The data only captures relationships enacted on Twitter, which are a small portion of all people aware of ACTion Alexandria, but even given the limitation of the source, several insights are apparent. A visualization of this network is shown in Figure 5.

![Figure 5: View of 1,709 accounts that follow or are followed by @ActionAlexVA on Twitter. Twitter users (icons) are connected to each other based on Follow relationships. Larger icons indicate accounts with more Twitter Followers, which indicates the potential reach of those users. Those positioned in the center Follow, or are Followed by many others among those connected to @ActionAlexVA. The @ActionAlexVA account is not shown in the graph.](image-url)
Though the graph looks cluttered due to the many connections between accounts (60,048), these represent only 2% of all possible connections. In other words, the network density is .02. As is typical of networks this size, there are some core accounts that include many connections (i.e., have a high in-degree), and many peripheral accounts that have relatively few connections (i.e., have a low in-degree). There are also not highly distinct clusters (i.e., subgroups) of accounts as you might see (modularity = 0.29), for example, in a network representing highly polarized political views.

An analysis of the accounts connected to @ActionAlexVA helps characterize its place in the network. The Alexandria, VA local government account shares the most connections with @ActionAlexVA (881, or 52%), followed by local Alexandria news outlets (e.g., @AlexTimesNW, 802, @AlexandriaPatch, 783, @DelRayPatch, 518). Because @ActionAlexVA fulfills a different function than government and news outlets, and there is no other organization like it among those that share the most connections, it appears that @ActionAlexVA is filling a unique niche in the network. Further analysis of the types of accounts following @ActionAlexVA reveals that many nonprofits, government agencies, philanthropic groups, and individual residents make up the list.

In summary, an analysis of ACTion Alexandria’s Twitter network suggests that they are well connected with a variety of Alexandria organizations, local government, and individual residents. They share many connections with local government and news outlets, but post different information, highlighting the unique niche they fill in Alexandria's information ecosystem.

**DISCUSSION**

**Summary of Findings**

The ACTion Alexandria project was set up as a pilot to better understand the opportunities and challenges of promoting civic engagement, problem solving, and collaboration in a local city environment. The original goals were largely met (see Table 8), though there are still challenges tied to the sustainability of ACTion Alexandria and the level of deep engagement by residents. This evaluation helps characterize and evaluate the novel set of technologies, social roles, and practices used to help broker civic actions among residents, nonprofits, and the city government.

Featured Actions were able to help solve problems that local nonprofits faced in their efforts to serve the public. All but one Featured Action were successful, and many exceeded their goals by 2-3 times and at a faster rate than the nonprofits could have performed on their own. However, this success was hard to scale up, as only approximately 2 Featured Actions could be launched a month given the heavy involvement of the Community Manager and the limited attention span of email list recipients and residents. Actions posted by nonprofits that are not Featured have not been successful as a whole.
Table 8: Program impact categories, outcomes, and results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Engagement    | **Short Term**  | Participants will be more aware of groups, events, opportunities, and services in Alexandria due to ACTion Alexandria.  
Participants will feel empowered to engage with fellow residents and organizations through ACTion Alexandria.  
- residents demonstrated increased awareness by their site use, email list participation, social media use, and participation in Spring2Action and other Actions  
- A few core participants, mostly from the nonprofit community, expressed feelings of increased empowerment |

|               | **Medium Term**  | Participants will attend more community events, join more groups, and use more services due to ACTion Alexandria.  
Participants will announce and discuss events and issues of importance to Alexandria.  
- Participants helped meet nonprofit needs via Actions much faster and to a greater extent. They also donated more funds during Spring2Action.  
- Participants discuss some events and issues of importance via Challenges, but those not tied to grant funding did not solicit as much discussion as desirable. Blog commenting is relatively rare, except on topics of high interest (e.g., bike safety). |

|               | **Long Term**    | Participants will reflect on their community participation and evaluate ways for continued improvement and collaboration. The ACTion Alexandria community will become self-sustaining [Not assessed during this evaluation] |

| Collaboration | **Short Term**  | Participants will be more aware of opportunities to work with each other.  
Participants will feel that they are part of a community working to solve local problems.  
- residents demonstrated increased awareness of collaboration opportunities by their site use, email list participation, social media use, and participation in Actions  
- Challenges, which were bigger than a single nonprofit, helped solicit input from diverse groups and fostered collaborations that would not have happened without ACTion Alexandria  
- A strong sense of community among the ACTion Alexandria participants was not realized for most participants who only participated occasionally |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Medium Term</th>
<th>Long Term</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participants will create groups and partnerships with each other to address problems.</td>
<td>[Not assessed during this evaluation]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• A couple of new groups were formed, including the Project Play Taskforce, efforts tied to Spring2Action, and increasingly groups tied to government (though they are still being formed)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Most new collaborations occurred primarily among nonprofit participants, with other residents participating less often</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Long Term</th>
<th>Problem solving Short Term</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participants will have an increased capacity to more effectively and efficiently solve local problems.</td>
<td>Participants will be aware of needs/problems that arise in the community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Participants will solve some small-scale projects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Action Alexandria’s social media efforts and email list did raise awareness of community needs/problems.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• All but one small-scale project (i.e., Action) were met and many were exceeded by 2-3 times</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Medium Term</th>
<th>Long Term</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participants will brainstorm and critique possible solutions to problems using ACTion Alexandria</td>
<td>Participants will solve community problems efficiently and effectively.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants will solve many small-scale problems and solve a few large-scale problems</td>
<td>A significant volume of problems will be solved by the platform, making the City a better place, and transforming the way the philanthropy happens in our community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Some brainstorming and critiquing of possible solutions occurred for Challenges that were tied to grants (e.g., Project Play), though other Challenges failed to solicit significant participation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• All but one small-scale project (i.e., Action) were met and many were exceeded by 2-3 times. A few large-scale problems (i.e., bigger than a single nonprofit) are being addressed due to new collaborations fostered by Action Alexandria, though the final impact of these is yet to be determined.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Long Term</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participants will solve community problems efficiently and effectively</td>
<td>Though long-term outcomes were not assessed, 3 years of Spring2Action have already shown a transformation in the ways in which fundraising can occur much more effectively and efficiently</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Challenges, which solicit ideas from residents have helped attract many more participants to the site, particularly to vote, though they do not fully reflect the diversity of residents in Alexandria. Those tied to a meaningful competition (e.g., ones with funding or a clear benefit to those who win) have had the most success. The platform itself, which enables residents to post Ideas, comments, and votes fills a niche that is not currently supported by the local government or other nonprofits. It has also allowed for Challenges that span specific organizations and helped lead to collaborations such as the Project Play Initiative. Challenges have helped bring in over 112 thousand dollars in grants (e.g., 75K for the KABOOM! Playground grant, 15K for the Spruce it Up grants, and 20K for the Caring for Kids grants). Continuing Challenges based on competitive grants seems like a promising approach, particularly if grant funding agencies continue to see the benefits of this unique approach. However, Challenges not centered around funded competitions have had trouble soliciting a critical mass of participants - particularly given the fact that there are relatively few repeat contributors. Finding ways to build a stronger sense of community may be needed to fully realize the potential of Challenges.

Though not a part of the initial vision for ACTion Alexandria, the Spring2Action online fundraising campaign for Alexandria nonprofits has been a huge success, helping raise over 1.2 million dollars (including matching funds) that will be spent to improve the lives of Alexandrians. The dramatic increases each year suggest that future Spring2Action events will be highly successful if they are continued and may be a source for sustainability of ACTion Alexandria. Finally, initial attempts to partner with the city government have shown promise, though there are many unanswered questions about how to effectively collaborate. Based on their recent collaboration and new rules of engagement for the city, we believe now is an opportune time to seek external grant funding to help explore different collaboration mechanisms.

Lessons Learned & Best Practices

Based on these findings, there are several best practices, lessons learned, and future recommendations which can be used to inform the project as it continues to evolve. These recommendations were developed and refined in consultation with ACT for Alexandria staff to ensure they reflected the realities and constraints of the program’s context.

Engagement

- Define the role of Community Manager and hire someone experienced with the requisite skill-set including the ability to act as a social network hub and community organizer, perform effective online (e.g., social media) and offline outreach and fundraising, and identify and frame opportunities for collective action and idea generation.
- Create win-win network-building opportunities where organizations and civic action brokering networks promote actions and ideas, and in so doing drive their own networks toward the other in a virtuous cycle. Starting with popular actions and ideas with well-known sponsoring organizations may be especially important in the early implementation stage.
● Use voting and other activities that encourage friendly competition to engage residents and bring them to the site and its associated programs and events. When possible, provide monetary incentives to help make it real.

Collaboration
● Continue to leverage organizations with existing social capital (e.g., ACT for Alexandria) when launching new initiatives for civic action brokering.
● Find ways to post Challenges that span multiple organizations (e.g., Project Play), in order to encourage solutions that are bigger than any one organization.

Problem Solving
● Provide initial support for nonprofits that need help in crafting compelling and achievable campaigns for Actions and Ideas that will work in an online environment.
● Broker Actions and Ideas between different nonprofits, as well as between nonprofits and residents.
● Continue to develop and test opportunities for brokering communication, collaboration, and problem solving between residents and government officials in real time.

Continued Challenges & Recommendations

Engagement
● A need to more seamlessly integrate with tracking tools already used by nonprofits. Otherwise, they risk being perceived as “extra work” to implement, as well as fail to demonstrate the value of the brokering relationship.
● Consider ways to translate people who come to the site to vote into more actively engaged participants.
● Decide if the site is intended to remain as a promotional site for action brokering or if more engagement on the site is desired. It may be enough to see success in the community through the use of the platform as a promotional tool rather than trying to create it as a ‘third place’ that people visit often.

Collaboration
● The competitive nature of philanthropy must be dealt with in a reasonable or even mutually beneficial way. Mechanisms will need to be designed to address fairness (e.g., which nonprofit is featured) and create win-win opportunities for nonprofits who collaborate (as the Project Play example demonstrated are possible).

Problem Solving
● A heavy reliance on a Community Manager and the limits of human attention make scaling up the number of Actions and Challenges difficult.
● Strategies and tools that foster continued engagement among initial participants are needed. Most participants only visited the ACTion Alexandria site once and participated in a single aspect of the site. Strategies such as transitioning winning Ideas into Featured Actions may help users learn about and become more active in different aspects of the site.
Looking Ahead

Overall, ACTion Alexandria has built up an enormous amount of social capital, particularly among the nonprofit community. They are now a well-known, trusted partner, with recognized skill in online fundraising, promotion, and thought leadership. However, they have not yet developed a strong online community of regular residents who initiate and participate repeatedly. We see two possible paths forward for ACTion Alexandria. One option is to continue to build on their existing experiences, social capital, and lessons’ learned. It is clear that their successes so far have only been possible with the heavy involvement of an experienced Community Manager and we believe to continue successfully this will still be the case. As a next step, we recommend focusing on building a stronger sense of community among the current members and soliciting more involvement and ongoing participation from leaders and members of existing email lists and neighborhood groups. Another step forward would be to find ways to take Ideas generated in Challenges and transition them into Actions that get completed. We also suggest seeking funding to explore how to best partner with the city government in reaching out to the residents. Another option would be to end the pilot project and focus more limited resources on continuing the Spring2Action fundraising campaign and competitive Challenges tied to grants for nonprofit groups or popular topics of interest to residents and the city government. Currently, we see these as the greatest return on investment and something that could be self-sustaining even without additional resources. These are also activities that are not being met by any other local organization and fit nicely within the traditional focus of ACT on supporting local nonprofits.