# Introduction

Thank you for reading *Building a Vibrant Community.* If you look at the cover, you'll see the subtitle of this book is *How Citizen-Powered Change Is Reshaping America.* It's really happening. We live in exciting times. Communities across the country are making big changes for the better, and if you're reading this, *yours* probably is, too. My hope is that when you finish this book you'll have a game plan. You'll know what you're already doing really, really well and you'll feel good about it. And hopefully, you'll have learned a few new tips that might help take you and your community to the next level.

In Thomas L. Friedman's book *Thank You for Being Late: An Optimist's Guide to Thriving in the Age of Accelerations*, he talks about how rapid accelerations in technology, globalization, and Mother Nature are disrupting our lives and leaving people feeling destabilized. He says these forces are like a hurricane, one in which the winds of change are swirling so fast that families can't find a way to anchor themselves. Friedman makes the case that the only answer is building healthy communities, ones that are flexible enough to navigate this hurricane and provide stability for the citizens within them. He quotes the words from a ballad by Brandi Carlile, "You can dance in a hurricane, but only if you're standing in the eye." He says the "eye" in this hurricane must be our local communities. We must provide people a firm place to stand and find stability while all this change is swirling around us.

According to Friedman, healthy communities not only help get citizens stabilized (economically and emotionally), but they are the key to repairing our nation. Existing power structures have aged out. Institutions have broken down. Things are a mess. He says the solutions to all our big problems reside at the local level, where there is enough nimbleness to adapt to changes. We often look to government to solve the big problems, but he says government simply can't move swiftly enough to be effective by themselves.

Michael Bloomberg and Carl Pope released a book titled *Climate of Hope: How Cities, Businesses, and Citizens Can Save the Planet*. In their book, they make the case that climate change is not one big problem but rather a series of smaller problems. We can tackle these problems. But by "we," Bloomberg and Pope don't mean national governments. They mean local leaders—elected officials, CEOs of corporations, small business owners, and citizens who care enough to take action. These are the people who can defeat climate change. And in the process they can create a stronger economy and healthier citizens.

I read both of these books with great interest. The idea that we needed to create healthy, vibrant communities in order to help our citizens thrive and reach their potential, and that we needed to engage local solutions to combat our biggest problems, really resonated with me. Shifting the thinking from global to a local focus made perfect sense and was very much in line with what we have been and are experiencing in Pensacola, FL.

Pensacola had experienced several decades of economic decline and had been ravaged by a hurricane. As a community, we had been suffering in a big way. In addition to economic and infrastructure problems, we were experiencing a talent drain. Our young people were leaving for better opportunities. We recognized that we had to do something and do it quickly. Through a series of local initiatives, we had experienced a citizen-led change and revitalization that was in full swing when these two books came out. After nearly 13 years of rebuilding, we have really seen big progress. Pensacola is living proof that healthy communities are the key to their own economic revival and that local solutions are the answer.

A strong local community has always been vital, but now quality communities matter more than ever. People have always wanted great places to live, with a solid local economy, good schools for their children, and fun activities nearby, but we had stopped being intentional about preserving our neighborhoods and local communities. The economic, social, and political challenges we've faced over the

last couple of decades have driven home how important our communities really are.

Functioning communities are important on many levels. The breakdown of our cities has other ramifications. Our bodies aren't working. We depend too much on cars, and our sedentary lifestyles are killing us. Social relations aren't working. We need and want to be connected. Politics aren't working. The revenue model doesn't make sense. Conversations aren't working. We aren't working together as a community to solve neighborhood problems.

Great communities make us feel grounded, protected, and empowered. They provide jobs and solid economic growth. They attract new talent and keep existing talent from leaving town. They do a great job of educating young people, they provide safe neighborhoods, and they nurture the health and well-being of all citizens. They provide a sense of belonging, connection, and support. And they're just more fun to live in.

*Every* community has the potential to be great. Geographic location helps, but it's only one small piece of the puzzle.

The good news is that quality communities can be built. The operative word is "built." Great communities don't just happen on their own. They are created strategically and intentionally. And they are almost always created through local solutions.

The methodology from the Gates Foundation is very clear. It is simple and stuck with me: Create a prototype to test a new approach. Record processes. Document findings. Tweak methods. Replicate successes. This is the path we took in rebuilding Pensacola. We are by no means finished, but we've learned a lot on this journey. Our hope is that other communities can utilize some of the ideas and craft their own framework for creating their own healthy community, as we have learned from others. When the lives of all our citizens are better, we are better.