

October 2002

*Building community
through civic dialogue
and action.*

Center for Neighborhoods

DISCUSSION PAPER

A Statement of Values, Accomplishments, and Intentions of the Twin Cities Neighborhood Movement

Prepared for
The Center for Neighborhoods

As part of its
Neighborhood Futures Initiative

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Building Community – Creating a sense of place and social fabric

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Innovative problem-solving, in partnership

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Genuine, long-lasting improvements to neighborhood livability



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The Center for Neighborhoods serves as a catalyst and a resource to promote and encourage ideas, alliances, policies, and actions that strengthen the livability and vitality of neighborhoods.

The Center's goal is to strengthen cities and the region by deepening civic dialogue at the neighborhood level, where shared goals can be set between public and private interests, and where people can actively participate in making their communities better.

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Introduction

What makes a city a great place to live? Why we live where we live is a reflection of what we value for ourselves and our families.

Neighborhood organizations provide us with the ability to help shape the places we live. They create a civic structure for people to engage with one another around concerns and opportunities that face them as a community—and instills an awareness of why place is important.

This Declaration is put forward as a discussion paper to distill the core values that connect those of us within the neighborhood movement, to reflect on our accomplishments, and to look forward to our future. It clarifies the importance of partnership if our work is to succeed. It invites a broader audience, beyond neighborhood organizations, to share and participate in advancing the goals of the neighborhood movement. By building a base of support for the purpose and intent of the neighborhood movement, we can begin the work of defining what will be required to achieve our goals, and what resources will be necessary.

The Center for Neighborhoods offers itself as a conduit for the dialogue to proceed. We extend our thanks to Steven Mayer, Ph.D., of Effective Communities, LLC, who has authored this discussion paper. Thanks also to the many neighborhood leaders that provided feedback and input to the development of this first draft. We invite each of you to join us in the process of shaping the Declaration so that it plays a meaningful role in defining the neighborhood movement of the Twin Cities. It's strength lies in our ability to unify around it—as individuals, as organizations, as a community.



Top: the Loring Park neighborhood of Minneapolis

Middle: Glenwood Lyndale Community Clinic in the Glenwood neighborhood of Minneapolis

Bottom: The business district of St. Paul's West Side, De La Sol

Theme 1

Building Community— Creating a sense of place and social fabric

A sense of place allows a person to put down roots, to create a home—a comfortable and secure place for self and family and friends. And with a sense of home comes an opportunity to belong to and participate in the life of the neighborhood.

Neighborhood organizations are good at weaving the social fabric needed to create a sense of place. People feel connected to their sense of place—where they live. A neighborhood organization typically begins with this shared reality to do its work building relationships among neighbors. Building relationships to achieve a sense of place—a neighborhood identity—for all the diverse elements of the community is a major part of the work of a neighborhood organization.

Building relationships leads to building community, which leads to creating community assets for combating a number of social ills—creating block clubs to be of help in times of crisis, creating plans and raising money to create a local fund for home improvements or business improvements, creating networks to provide child care or home health care or to swap lawn care for tutoring, for example. These types of activities, which neighborhood organizations do so well, build the relationships that help create a strong, tightly knit social fabric.

Social fabric is important to the well being and vitality of a city and region because it provides the support systems that social services and health services rely on for their success. It provides the informed discussion that the electoral process relies on. And it provides the customer base that local businesses need.

Throughout the Twin Cities...

Neighborhood organizations help reinforce a sense of place to people throughout the Twin Cities and its surrounding region. They each represent a distinct geographically defined area, and within their boundaries they create and support events that allow neighbors to meet each other, and to pursue common interests together. They provide opportunities to learn the history and heritage and tradition of the neighborhood, as well as how they are changing as a community.

Neighborhood organizations provide a set of eyes and ears and voices to local issues. They use a variety of media to help keep residents in touch with news, information, perspectives and views about important issues that affect their sense of place.

Neighborhood organizations help create the social fabric needed to reduce isolation and support interdependence. They provide opportunities for people and groups to meet and work and play together—to build relationships, the foundation for other, more long-term efforts that require resident involvement.



**Elliot Park Neighborhood
mural by Ta-coumba T.
Aiken, 1992.**

Future considerations

Neighborhood organizations are skilled at, but must strengthen this relationship-building work. Creating or supporting neighborhood events and festivals (to celebrate something that people share), cultural gatherings (to display artwork and food and music), friendly competitions (for the best garden)—is typically the first step in building community. Building relationships is the work of a “neighborhood organizer,” the principal staff person of a neighborhood organization. Building relationships—helping people feel connected to each other, to resources, and to opportunities to participate in the life of the community—reduces the isolation and alienation that can come with urban living and increases peoples’ ability to solve problems and create solutions for themselves.

Producing even one neighborhood event requires a persistent organizer and probably several volunteers, with sustained coordination. Volunteers can give only sporadically. Trained organizers are in very short supply. Lines of communication always need attention. The teamwork required to produce an event raises challenges of coordination, accountability to each other and the community, cooperation from others, and sustained effort. *Support for sustained relationship-building, or neighborhood organizing, is needed.*

The communications infrastructure. Basic communications channels—especially print media—are well established in the Twin Cities, having been supported through city and foundation funding for twenty years. Many people are accustomed to getting news through neighborhood newspapers, as well as through flyers and posters. Translations into Spanish, Somali, Vietnamese, Hmong, are common as well, though undertaken at considerable expense. Many neighborhood organizations now have web sites that provide a calendar of neighborhood events and opportunities for participation.

Facilitating less formal communications is perhaps even more important, and more labor intensive. Back fence, kitchen table or park bench discussions about very local affairs are parts of the communication and community-building network—maybe even the most important part. *Helping to create safe spaces to gather and encouraging communication is part of the work of a neighborhood organization.*

Broadening the vision. While neighborhoods offer one set of boundaries for thinking of place and home, one could argue that city and region do as well. Yet neighborhoods don’t yet have a place in community building discussions at that larger scale. Building relationships means more than person-to-person relationships; it is also organization-to-organization. Neighborhood organizations have much to offer to city-wide and regional discussions on issues facing all of us. Building relationships across neighborhood boundaries will become increasingly important as solutions to many critical issues require regional coordination. *We must work to create forums that invite neighborhood perspectives in regional affairs, and invite regional perspectives in neighborhood affairs.*



Harrison Neighborhood Gateway by Jane Frees-Kluth, 1990.

Theme 2

Civic Engagement—The foundation of democracy

Participation in the decision-making that affects one's own quality of life is a good thing, an elementary and essential part of the democratic process. With participation comes partial ownership of the solutions, a greater willingness to support the ongoing development of neighborhood vitality, a stake in the quality of local life, and investment in the future.

Broad community participation provides the opportunity for greater applicability and acceptance of solutions, which can be enhanced through skilled facilitation. Participation by those of different perspectives also reduces the likelihood of really bad ideas becoming permanent, or of major errors in design being implemented.

Throughout the Twin Cities...

Neighborhood organizations engage residents in what is often their first opportunity to participate in civic affairs. They solicit residents' opinions and perspectives on neighborhood issues and create potential projects or actions in response. They hold community meetings and open forums to address issues that affect the neighborhood. They promote an agenda for neighborhood improvement.

Neighborhood organizations create opportunities for residents to contribute their skills and talents to efforts that improve conditions in the neighborhood. They involve residents in planning and visioning exercises to find and implement solutions. They provide a platform for the power-to-the-people types, the good government types, the single-issue types, the raise-the-property-value types, and the can't-we-all-live-together types. They build a neighborhood base of support for advocating policy support, resource allocation, and project implementation.

Neighborhood organizations strive to align government decisions and services with the preferences and wishes of neighborhood residents and businesses. They represent the ideas, priorities, and plans of their residents to city, county, and state governmental bodies, businesses, developers and others. They create access to decision-making downtown and beyond on matters that affect the quality of life in the neighborhood.



Young people working in the Powderhorn neighborhood Youth Farm and Market Project garden.

Future considerations

The value of skilled organizers. All Twin Cities neighborhood organizations have developed mechanisms for getting input and recruiting volunteers—polls, questionnaires, public forums, organizational meetings. Sustaining the engagement of those interested in neighborhood vitality—the work of neighborhood organizers—is no small feat. Right now there is enough engagement work to occupy two or three times the number of organizers we currently have.

Participation in neighborhood organizations is too often crisis-driven, and difficult to maintain once the sense of crisis has passed. We need to develop a greater variety of ways for residents to participate; too often the skill asked for is committee involvement, for which too many haven't enough patience, interest or ability. Increasing the number of organizers would create opportunities that go beyond committee work, and would allow better connections to more segments of the community. Facilitating the discussions among different groups of people, and moving their plans and ideas along should be more widespread. *More money is needed to employ skilled neighborhood organizers.*

Legitimizing “civic engagement” as an outcome worthy of investment. Local political structures have learned to pay attention to neighborhood sentiment. More and more elected city officials have their roots in neighborhood organizations, and they have come to appreciate the value of civic engagement. An elevated role for neighborhood organizations is possible when public bureaucracies as well as the gamut of philanthropic institutions recognize that the genuine success of the programs they fund is facilitated on the ground by an engaged rather than passive and alienated citizenry. *Citizen participation and civic engagement ARE the outcomes of neighborhood organizations, and it's achievement of these outcomes that funders should invest in.*

Going to scale. Neighborhoods acting in concert will be more influential than those acting alone, yet there are few mechanisms that support neighborhood organizations working together. The voices of neighborhood residents could go far in addressing the issues that Twin Cities residents, media, and institutions have learned to notice at the regional level. Challenges in transportation, in economic development, education, and affordable housing are problems that neighborhood organizations are used to wrestling with inside their boundaries. Neighborhood sentiment is too often parochial in nature, putting local interests above the larger community's interests. Needed are solutions that go beyond neighborhood boundaries. There are already a wealth of people with informed talent and perspective living in neighborhoods (indeed, where else could they live?) that could be harnessed better if there were opportunities to problem-solve that reached across neighborhoods. *To have impact on issues that extend beyond neighborhood boundaries we must find ways to support collaboration between neighborhoods at various scales, bridging to citywide and regional policy discussions.*



Longfellow Community Council's annual meeting.

Theme 3

Accountability, diversity, and organizational effectiveness

Creating events, staging forums, forging relationships, establishing priorities, making plans, promoting movement, keeping everyone abreast of developments—it all takes an organization. An organized organization. One that is accountable to local residents as well as to outside funders or partners, one that can manage its affairs responsibly, generate and maintain momentum, relate to all the different interest groups in the neighborhood.

Neighborhood organizations are often critiqued on their ability to reflect and represent the diverse constituencies that live within their boundaries. It is one of the most critical areas of work that neighborhoods must attend to if they are to maintain their legitimacy. The community neighborhood organizations propose to represent is more than just those that show up.

Throughout the Twin Cities....

Neighborhood organizations are governed by and are accountable to local residents. They have by-laws that mandate representation of the different groups and interests living or working in the neighborhood. They strive to be inclusive of the diversity of the neighborhood, and seek broad involvement in the work of the organization.

Neighborhood organizations provide what is often an individual's first experience in serving on a board of directors of a nonprofit organization. It's a setting in which many

people begin to flex their leadership muscles, whether to advance up the rungs of the civic leadership ladder, the nonprofit management ladder, or the issue-advocacy ladder.

Neighborhood organizations seek to build effective and accountable organizations. Many seek out training for Board members and staff on the skills needed to run an effective organization. They seek to build the capacity of the organization so that it can take on a larger load and do more, better work. They seek to strengthen their management, their connections to the community, their programs and services, and their fund-raising capacity—to improve organizational effectiveness.



Bicyclists in Rice Park

Future considerations

The imperative to build organizational capacity. Neighborhood organizations have delivered so much to the vitality of our cities, yet they are woefully undercapitalized. Part of the problem is that our part of the social contract—providing the mechanisms of civic engagement and using them to promote innovative solutions (and, by the way, making our city a better place to live in the process)—is woefully undervalued. Our work is insufficiently legitimized, yet its payoffs are huge. We have the imperative to build an effective and successful organization, and we have the right to create pay scales that can attract competent, skilled staff.

Running an organization with responsibility, accountability, and inclusiveness takes a substantial amount of energy and financial resources. *To offer effective accounting systems, administration, as well as provide the organizing needed to support meaningful citizen involvement, far greater investment in organizational capacity building and support for operations is needed.*

More flexible and adaptive forms of neighborhood organizational governance are needed. Another challenge is the limitations of the very form our neighborhood organizations are allowed to take. They are built on an

essentially corporate model, with top down direction, where the board is made up of representatives of different segments of the neighborhood. Regardless of the ideal of diversity, which all salute, the representative form of governance has never succeeded in incorporating renters as well as homeowners as well as absentee landlords, or newcomers as well as old-timers, or sustained activity by so-called minority groups that goes beyond tokenism. Virtually all neighborhood organizations acknowledge the difficulty of sustained connection to Latinos, African Americans, Africans, and Asians, despite their growing numbers and stake in the neighborhood. The corporate form works against participation rather than for it. *Different governance models that successfully include and energize the strength of all groups in the neighborhood are needed.*

Only one bona fide neighborhood organization allowed? Adding to the challenge is the requirement by both Minneapolis and St. Paul that there be only one designated citizen participation agency per neighborhood. There is no reason—except limited capacity and limited political will—that a neighborhood organization cannot do the work of more and more varied interests. While this structural constraint assures a conduit of funds to the local level, it buys only the limited capacity of a single organization. *The situation calls for considering an umbrella structure or affiliate structure, where a neighborhood organization is formally connected to a variety of other groups in the neighborhood.*



Building affordable housing efforts, such as East Village, works best with the participation of a viable neighborhood organization.

Theme 4

Innovative problem-solving, in partnership

Necessity is the motherhood of invention, and neighborhoods have necessity. All the world's ills (as well as its joys), come home to roost at the neighborhood level, where we live. Keeping up with the pressures of urban life is the work of neighborhood organizations, even before they percolate up to official municipal levels. Long before many stories break in the Cities' dailies or TV news shows, they have been told in neighborhood newspapers, and even before that in meetings that occur throughout the neighborhood—with problem-solving initiative well underway.

The changes in urban life that we have seen in the last ten to twenty years—changes in the local economy, changes in the local demography, changes in the political and cultural landscape—have forced neighborhood organizations to respond with creativity. One of the most salutary effects of neighborhood activism during this period is the creation of innovative arrangements with city agencies, and new partnerships with local business. The innovation of Twin Cities neighborhoods—not just for problem solving but for creating enjoyable life — has been the subject of national attention.

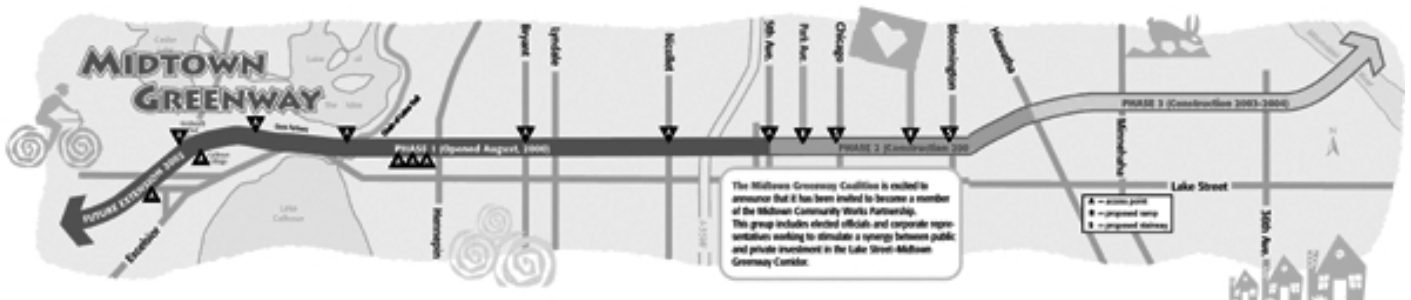
To produce the gains in neighborhood conditions that we seek, neighborhood organizations must work in partnership with other institutions. It's true that some of the work of neighborhood organizations—strengthening the social fabric, engaging local folks in neighborhood affairs—can be achieved with only very local organizing. But the big improvements that make for significant neighborhood viability—improvements to affordable housing, to economic prospects neighborhood residents, to educational resources that promote success in life, to transportation that genuinely serves the neighborhood—all require political support and major financial assets, assets typically not easily accessible to neighborhood organizations.

Throughout the Twin Cities...

Neighborhood organizations think about and work on problems that point to how our systems fall short. Do transportation systems serve the people that live here? Do law enforcement systems utilize appropriate methods to instill a sense of safety throughout the community? Neighborhoods are the hub in which people and systems collide. And it is the creative problem-solving within neighborhood efforts that forges innovation.

Neighborhood organizations look for partnership to move ideas forward. They identify talent and skills inside and outside the neighborhood that can be helpful. They create plans and advocate their support and implementation. They seek partnerships with a variety of municipal and business entities that can help implement neighborhood plans. Neighborhood organizations supply the civic engagement and local connections that make or break a plan that affects local quality of life.

The Midtown Greenway will cross 16 neighborhoods and involves partnerships with over 30 organizations.



Future considerations

Partners needed. Neighborhood organizing in the past has been thought of as oppositional—neighborhoods in opposition to City Hall, or business, or state government. But the lessons and accomplishments of the past ten to twenty years have taught us that honey is better than vinegar as a tool for neighborhood revitalization, and that organizing is about building constructive relationships leading to constructive partnerships that benefit the neighborhood. Indeed, it is with this attitude that so many gains have been made for neighborhoods, and it is with this attitude that we can imagine an expanded role for neighborhood-based creativity and action.

Neighborhood organizations will need to find better ways to talk about what they've built. And those who listen will need to find better ways to appreciate and build on what they're hearing. It's a mistake to think of citizen participation and civic engagement as merely process—it creates a platform for community support, which is often a pivotal and critical outcome, improving the odds for success of future endeavors.

Partnerships are needed with all levels of city and regional government. Currently, neighborhood organizations essentially see themselves as liaison between neighborhood residents and city government, but new creative partnerships are emerging between neighborhood organizations and different city and state agencies, with real exchanges of services and dollars. This should be amplified and expanded.

We've also seen partnership among adjacent neighborhood organizations, where boundaries meet, especially along major corridors or at commercial nodes. We can imagine this on still larger scales, where neighborhoods throughout the city partner collectively with a state agency, for example, or with the Metropolitan Council.

On another front, neighborhood organizations could have far more influence in their own neighborhood if they partnered more with other nearby institutions—ethnic/cultural organizations, social services, recreational programs, family and youth programs—all kinds of associations. *A major obstacle in developing strong institutional partners is the inadequate funding available for neighborhood staff.*

Who you calling “obstructionist”? To the extent that neighborhood organizations have been seen as “obstructionist,” it is because their voices were ignored or ideas were excluded from the planning process. Win-win solutions are possible. The modern neighborhood movement began in a climate of “power to the people.” Today a variety of legitimate forms have worked in creating improvements at the neighborhood level, and most have recognized the value of working in cooperation and partnership with other organizations, agencies, businesses, etc. who have seen mutual self-interest. *Opportunities that facilitate cooperation would be enhanced through staff support provided by governmental agencies.*



The introduction of light rail in South Minneapolis has spurred problem-solving and partnerships all along the corridor.

Theme 5

Genuine, long-lasting improvements to neighborhood livability

Neighborhood organizations throughout the Twin Cities work to improve conditions in their neighborhoods in ways that benefit their residents. Their projects are designed to remedy troublesome situations, making the neighborhood more livable and more attractive to investment. They search for the right kinds of investments and political support needed to implement neighborhood plans. Sustaining neighborhood efforts is often challenging given the changing tide of public and private resources available to support it.

Below is a brief listing of the arenas in which neighborhood organizations partake, and the kinds of projects they have undertaken.

Housing—home improvement loan programs, production of new housing, removal of abandoned homes, landscaping

Public safety—crime prevention block clubs, improved street lighting, restorative justice, conflict resolution

Natural resource protection—watershed management, recycling, riverfront development, wetland restoration, pollution clean-up, stump removal, buckthorn removal

Land use—zoning change requests, conditional use permits, licenses, community gardens, historic designation, clean-up

Parks and Recreation—skateboard parks, off-leash dog parks, building access

Family life—child care at PTA meetings, after-school and summer programming, “welcome wagon”

Transportation—bicycle lanes and pathways, traffic control, noise control, parking

Education—public school building access, computer centers, ESL (English as a Second Language)

Arts and culture—cultural festivals, art fairs, neighborhood gateways and welcome signs, murals, garden competitions

Economic development—job bank, commercial development, business start-ups, business mentoring, retail façade improvement, job opportunity fair, liaison with business association, welfare-to-work, business mentoring

Future considerations

The issues facing neighborhoods are also felt at larger geographic scales—at the municipal, regional, national, and even global levels. Solutions to neighborhood issues must be carried out on these levels, as well, to be sustainable.

The McKinsey & Company recommendations submitted to the City of Minneapolis names four major goals for the city that could be considered goals for neighborhoods throughout the region. They are affordable housing, economic development, education, and transportation. How these elements are planned for and developed relies on various bureaucratic processes and decision-making. The rightful place for neighborhood organizations is yet to be clearly defined—it could be argued—in Minneapolis and St. Paul as well as the surrounding suburban communities.

To be effective, citywide and regional solutions will require neighborhood participation. All five of the themes described in this paper—community building, civic engagement, organizational effectiveness, and innovative partnerships—are essential to finding solutions and implementing them in ways that are sustainable.