

Seattle's Department of Neighborhoods: Enhancing Government Effectiveness by Empowering Communities

By Jim Diers

Abstract

Governments everywhere tend to think of their jurisdictions primarily as places with needs. They seek to address these needs by relying on tax revenues and bureaucratic expertise. Such a top-down approach ignores the fact that, in addition to needs, every jurisdiction is comprised of communities with underutilized resources. By empowering communities to address their own priorities through their own associations, government can unleash these resources to more effectively meet community needs. There is much communities can do that government can not do and there is even more that can be accomplished when government and communities work together as true partners. It was this belief in the value of community engagement that caused the City of Seattle to establish a Department of Neighborhoods in 1988.

The Department of Neighborhoods developed several programs designed to encourage citizens to work together for their mutual benefit. A Neighborhood Matching Fund provides city tax dollars for community self-help projects in exchange for the neighborhood's contribution of an equal value in volunteer labor, donated goods and services, and/or cash. Likewise, through a bottom-up neighborhood planning program, the City of Seattle provided citizens with money to hire their own planners accountable to the community.

This paper will utilize case studies from the Seattle neighborhoods of Columbia City and Delridge to illustrate how the Neighborhood Planning and Neighborhood

Matching Fund programs have empowered communities to work on their own behalf. Members of these communities have local knowledge, a holistic perspective, caring relationships, an entrepreneurial spirit, and a passion for place – qualities seldom found in a bureaucracy. Previously untapped local resources, ranging from artistic talents to historic buildings, have been mobilized to revitalize both neighborhoods. Education, economic development, public safety, social welfare, and the environment are no longer the sole domain of government. Columbia City and Delridge are showing that empowered communities take responsibility and act responsibly.

A City of Neighborhoods

Although Seattle is a city with a population of 580,000, its residents experience community at a much smaller scale—in their neighborhoods. Seattle’s many hills, valleys, and bodies of water provide natural boundaries for about 100 neighborhoods. Each neighborhood typically includes a business district, a school, and a city government facility such as a library, fire station, recreation center, or park that provide the icons and public gathering places so important to the identity of the neighborhood and the sense of community. Neighborhoods are further defined by the style of the buildings and the characteristics of the people who inhabit them.

It is at the neighborhood level that people tend to interact with one another and with their local government. Virtually every neighborhood has its own community council, a democratic organization whose membership is open to all residents; historically, these councils have focused on advocating the residents’ positions on issues affecting their neighborhoods. Most neighborhoods are also represented by a business association. Every neighborhood has dozens of other voluntary associations with special

interests such as education, environment, recreation, religion, history, art, crime prevention, or community service.

Significantly, the neighborhood associations are independent of city government. City government does not formally recognize the community councils and other associations, and it does not delegate any power or supply any operating funds to them. The identity of the neighborhood and the legitimacy of its associations emanates solely from the members of the community.

In fact, grass roots activists and city government have frequently been adversaries. Community councils have tended to be most active when they are in opposition to an action or inaction of city government. They were particularly active in the mid-1980s, a period of enormous change for Seattle. Some community councils fought zoning changes that sacrificed the cherished character of neighborhoods in attempting to accommodate growth. Others protested that city government was not doing enough to combat increasing problems with gang violence and drug dealing. The community councils uniformly complained that there was inadequate access to city hall and that the City was spending too much money on large, downtown projects and reserving too little for neighborhood priorities.

Dissatisfied with the contentious process and its outcomes, some elected officials and neighborhood leaders worked together in advocating for a more participatory and collaborative model of governance. Rather than arguing over the allocation of fixed government funds, they reasoned, why not involve the community in helping to establish priorities and why not tap underutilized neighborhood resources? Why not look to the community for solutions, whether the issue was public safety or accommodating growth?

Department of Neighborhoods

In 1988, the City of Seattle established a Department of Neighborhoods; Mayor Charles Royer appointed me to be its first director. As a former community organizer, I was excited about this opportunity to further empower Seattle's community associations. As a new public official, I also understood the importance of building mutually beneficial partnerships between community associations and city government.

The Department of Neighborhoods developed a variety of programs to help achieve these objectives. I hired community organizers who trained neighborhood leaders and assisted them to build additional, and more inclusive and effective, community councils. Little city halls were established in 13 neighborhood locations throughout Seattle to improve access to government staff, programs, and services but also to strengthen connections within and among neighborhoods. The P-Patch program was greatly expanded so that 75 sites now support more than 6000 community gardeners, many of whom are recent immigrants and refugees. But, the programs that have made the greatest contribution to Seattle's livability and that are the focus of this paper are the Neighborhood Planning Program and the Neighborhood Matching Fund.

Neighborhood Matching Fund

The Neighborhood Matching Fund has been surprisingly successful at what it set out to do: "build community," both physically and socially. Through the program, the City provides funding in exchange for the community's match of an equal value in cash, volunteer labor, or donated goods and services in support of citizen-initiated projects. Not only are the projects transforming the physical appearance of the neighborhoods, they are

building a stronger sense of community by involving thousands of people from all walks of life.

The Neighborhood Matching Fund began with \$150,000 in 1989. The program was so successful that it grew to \$4.5 million per year. The City's \$35 million investment to date has leveraged another \$50 million in community match.

Over its first 18 years, the Neighborhood Matching Fund has backed more than 3,000 projects. Community groups have used the program to build new playgrounds at most city parks and public schools; create new parks; reforest open space; plant street trees; develop community gardens; restore streams and wetlands; create murals, banners, and sculpture; install kiosks; equip computer centers; renovate facilities; build traffic circles; pilot community school programs; document community histories; develop neighborhood plans; organize new groups; and much, very much more. These projects are visible in every Seattle neighborhood and contribute greatly to their livability.

The greatest contribution that the Neighborhood Matching Fund makes to livability, however, is the way in which it builds a stronger sense of community. While a neighborhood is the physical space that people share, a community is defined by social relationships – the extent to which people identify with and support one another. Strong communities provide a basis for public safety, environmental sustainability, social welfare, and personal happiness.

There are three factors that make for a strong sense of community, and the Neighborhood Matching Fund contributes to all three. The first is a shared identity. The Fremont Troll, dragon poles in the International District, historic murals in West Seattle, a revitalized Columbia City business district, a Vietnamese oral history project, and

several neighborhood gateways are examples of projects that became focal points for communities and provided a common identity.

A second factor making for community are public gathering places. Milenko Matanovic, director of the Pomegranate Center, says: “Community is all about bumping. The more often people bump into one another, the more they will build relationships and identify as part of the same community.” Community gathering places are where this bumping occurs, and scores of them have been developed through the Neighborhood Matching Fund – new parks, new community gardens, and new community centers. Because these gathering places were designed and built by the community, they tend to be well used and well taken care of.

The key ingredient for building community is to have a vehicle that brings people together to work for their common good, and there is no better vehicle than the Neighborhood Matching Fund. Matching Fund projects have involved tens of thousands of volunteers, many of whom have become involved in their community and with their local government for the first time. At last count, nearly one million hours had been contributed to projects.

The Neighborhood Matching Fund gives people an opportunity to get involved without necessarily going to meetings. Although meetings have been the traditional form of community involvement, many people are meeting-averse. Too often, meetings seem to result in nothing but more meetings. The Matching Fund enables people to make a short-term commitment in support of a time-limited project. There are roles for people of all ages and abilities. Participants know their involvement is making a difference and they

see results. In the process, they develop relationships that typically lead to their participation in other community activities.

Not only do citizens initiate and implement projects, but they control the Neighborhood Matching Fund program as well. Representatives of neighborhood organizations developed the guidelines for the program, and they recommend the projects to be funded. Both the mayor and city council have consistently upheld the recommendations of the citizen review process. Not only does this bottom-up process have great integrity, it has this additional benefit: with citizens making the recommendations, politicians don't get blamed for rejecting proposals; elected officials are identified with only the funded projects and can take their bows at the continuous stream of groundbreaking and ribbon-cutting ceremonies.

Community-Driven Planning

As a former community organizer, I hated neighborhood planning. Planning was too often the City's substitute for action. Plans came out of city hall with only token involvement of the community. Not surprisingly, the planners were the only ones who really understood or cared about the plans' vision and recommendations. With no constituency to implement them, the plans usually just sat on the shelf.

So when I was appointed director of the new Department of Neighborhoods, although I was expected to hire planners, I hired organizers instead. I wanted to make sure that all communities had a strong voice and could utilize the City's programs and services. It seemed to me that marginalized communities in particular would benefit more from organizers than from planners.

Yet, one of the key responsibilities I had been charged with was the development of a neighborhood planning program. With no planners on staff, I turned to the only resource available. Neighborhood planning became an eligible use of the Neighborhood Matching Fund. This resulted in a new, bottom-up model of neighborhood planning that differs from the traditional model in five major respects.

First, with the new model, it is the community rather than city government that initiates the planning process. When the City initiated plans, often the community was either uninterested or suspicious about the City's real motives: "What are they going to try to get past the community this time?" The community won't initiate a plan through the Neighborhood Matching Fund unless it is clear about exactly why a plan is needed. After all, planning is a lot of work and, if planning is not really needed, that energy could be better expended elsewhere.

Second, the new model lets the community define its own planning area. When the City developed plans, it often used census tracts to determine boundaries. The community instead defines the neighborhood by its own understanding of the neighborhood, usually in accordance with the boundaries identified in community council bylaws.

Third, the community identifies its own scope of work. City plans tended to focus on the function of the department that was doing the planning, typically land use, transportation, or community development. When the community is in charge, community members plan for what is important to them, whether that is economic development, public safety, human services, recreation, open space, transportation,

affordable housing, education, history, or arts and culture. Often, communities want to address all these elements and to plan more holistically than do City departments.

Fourth, the community can hire its own planner rather than ending up with whatever planner the City assigns them. They can look for a planner who works well with people in addition to having good technical skills. It makes an inestimable difference when a planner is accountable to the community.

Finally, with the new model, community members become much more involved in the planning process because they are required to come up with the match. Since it might prove difficult to conduct successful fundraisers for planners' salaries, the community's match usually consists of hundreds of volunteers. Community volunteers are active in every step of the process: submitting the application, hiring the planner, drafting and conducting surveys, and developing the vision and recommendations. That means that people understand the plan and feel ownership of it. They hold the City accountable for implementing the plan and, moreover, they take responsibility for much of the implementation themselves.

Columbia City

The first community that chose to develop a plan through the Neighborhood Matching Fund was Southeast Seattle, an economically and ethnically diverse collection of neighborhoods. They formed a planning committee comprising one representative from each of the dozen community councils and business associations, and they selected SouthEast Effective Development (SEED), a local community development corporation, to serve as their consultant.

Although many plans for Southeast Seattle had been developed over the years, this would be the most inclusive planning effort to date. The planning committee members made sure that their respective stakeholder groups stayed well informed and actively engaged throughout the process. As part of the effort to broaden participation, the planning committee employed an innovative outreach strategy. Survey forms were distributed in the most racially diverse places in the community; namely, the schools. To increase the rate of return, the committee persuaded the local dairy to promise a free ice cream cone for every survey completed. This outreach strategy cost little but netted nearly 1,500 completed surveys.

Not surprisingly, the resulting Southeast Seattle Action Plan had broad community support. When the plan was presented to city council in 1991, council chambers was packed with community representatives demanding that the plan be adopted; be adopted *and* implemented. The City agreed to prepare an annual progress report, and the mayor himself delivered it each year at a large community meeting.

The City followed through on all of the key plan recommendations. The small, deteriorating Rainier Community Center was demolished and replaced with the largest community center in Seattle. Millions of dollars were spent to repave the community's major arterials. Additional street and alley lighting was installed to enhance public safety. Priority went to the processing of permits in target areas along Rainier Avenue South, facilitating major new commercial development. The City purchased a vacant block near Rainier Avenue South and South Dearborn Street for intensive residential development, including co-housing and homes for first-time buyers.

Equally important, the community did its part to implement the plan. Much of the residential and commercial development was undertaken by SEED and other community-based organizations. With help from the Neighborhood Matching Fund, the community built playgrounds, painted murals, and planted street trees as recommended in their plan. Much of the community's focus was on the revitalization of Columbia City, an historic business district in the heart of Southeast Seattle.

Columbia City had fallen victim to increasing gang, drug, and prostitution activity beginning in the late 1970s. By the early 1990s, both of the neighborhood's clothing stores, the theatre, and the furniture store had closed and, finally, the neighborhood's only supermarket went out of business. As more and more businesses moved out, more and more crime moved in. Several restaurants remained, but even they were afraid to open at night. There was typically more business being conducted outside the stores than inside.

Faced with continuing business closures, a group of residents and merchants organized themselves as the Columbia City Revitalization Committee. They sponsored an International Pancake Breakfast and Town Meeting on a Saturday morning in the spring of 1995 at the Tropicana, a Filipino restaurant and bakery. The free food lured a diverse crowd of about 150 people who filled every chair and all of the aisle space. After breakfast, everyone was asked to think of a project that could improve Columbia City. If it was an idea that they felt passionately about, they were invited to summarize the project in a few words on a large sheet of paper and to take a couple of minutes to describe their idea to the entire assembly. Once everyone had an opportunity to share their ideas, the papers summarizing all of the proposed projects were posted in the front

of the room, with similar ideas grouped together. Each cluster of ideas was then assigned to a different restaurant or store in the neighborhood.

At that point, all Town Meeting participants voted with their feet by joining a discussion of whatever idea most appealed to them. The project originator was responsible for leading the discussion. Participants were encouraged to feel free to leave one discussion and join another until they found a project and a group that resonated with them. Only the ideas that stimulated sufficient interest were pursued because there was no one else to carry them out. By the end of the morning, six projects had been launched and each group had planned its initial steps, assigned tasks, and scheduled its next meeting.

The biggest success to come out of that first Town Meeting was proposed by Darryl Smith, who later became president of the Columbia City Revitalization Committee. Darryl's idea was to create an event that would showcase the neighborhood's ethnic restaurants and give the community a sense of what a vibrant Columbia City would look like by enticing crowds of people to patronize the restaurants on a single night. One \$5 cover charge allowed people to see five different live music performances in five restaurants: Ethiopian, Filipino, Italian, and Thai restaurants plus a Victorian tearoom operated by an African American couple. The initial event attracted 300 people, filling Columbia City's sidewalks with happy customers and putting smiles on the faces of the restaurateurs as well. It was such a success that Beatwalk has become a regular event on the first Friday of each month. There are many more customers now, and there are a dozen venues, but the cover charge is still \$5.

Beatwalk was so effective in attracting customers to Columbia City that Karen Kinney came to the second Town Meeting to propose adding another attraction: a farmers

market. Meeting participants loved Karen's idea and worked with her over the next two years to plan and organize it. The Columbia City Farmers Market opened in June 1998. Ironically, the venue was the large parking lot surrounding the neighborhood's former supermarket. That first farmers market featured over 30 growers selling fresh, locally grown produce, much of it organic. Live music and cooking demonstrations contributed to a festive atmosphere. Literature tables provided information on current community issues and projects. The roughly 1,500 people who turned out every Wednesday from June through October seemed to enjoy the opportunity to visit with neighbors as much as they enjoyed buying directly from producers. Each year the market has attracted more vendors and more customers – in 2006, an average of about 2,500 a day. Surveys show that most of the customers, when they have finished at the farmers market for the day, stay to shop or eat elsewhere in the business district.

Many other equally successful projects have been born at the Town Meetings. The local elementary school was opened in the evenings for community use and its asphalt parking lot was converted into a community garden. A closed church was reborn as a multi-cultural center. An abandoned store became a place where youth were trained to fix bicycles, earning bicycles of their own in the process. Columbia City now has an annual garden tour and an annual barbeque cook-off. Two handsome kiosks were installed along the sidewalk to promote those and other events.

Even with these and many other projects and with the marketing efforts of the Columbia City Revitalization Committee, a half-block in this historic district remained boarded up and vacant as it had been for 20 years. Finally, at one Town Meeting, someone suggested that if the community couldn't attract real businesses, they could at

least pretend. The community used the Neighborhood Matching Fund to contract with the SouthEast Seattle Arts Council to paint murals depicting businesses on the plywood covering the doors and windows. They painted an ice cream parlor on the corner and next to that a bookstore, toy store, hat shop, and dance studio. Suddenly, Columbia City seemed to be alive. The murals looked so realistic that passing motorists stopped to shop. The murals also captured the imagination of a developer and several business owners. Within a year, every one of the murals had to be removed because real businesses wanted to locate there, including an art gallery cooperative, yet another Town Meeting project.

Columbia City has indeed been revitalized. Today, there are no empty storefronts. New, mixed-use development is being built to keep up with demand. All of this change resulted from the community's vision and built on community resources.

Delridge

Delridge is an atypical community, because it has historically lacked the central business district that gives other Seattle neighborhoods their identity. Delridge instead has been defined by an arterial which bisects the community as it traverses the length of the valley. An auto-oriented mix of gas stations, convenience stores, commercial buildings, apartment complexes, and simple houses line busy Delridge Way. Rather than serving as a basis for community, Delridge Way is the quickest route to places like White Center, Burien, and Downtown Seattle.

Yet, Delridge does have some distinctive assets. It has been a welcoming place for new immigrants throughout its history. Today's multi-cultural population of 30,000 enjoys relatively affordable housing. And, because Delridge has been underdeveloped, it

boasts wonderful environmental assets including one-third of Seattle's greenbelts and the longest free flowing creek.

As land became scarce in the rest of Seattle, however, developers discovered Delridge. They cleared some greenbelts for housing developments and even built over parts of Longfellow Creek. Residents feared that they were in danger of losing the natural environment that they prized.

In the late 1980s, a handful of activists organized as the Delridge Community Association in order to fight bad development. One of those activists, Vivian McLean, proceeded to organize community councils in every Delridge neighborhood – twelve in all. Collectively, the community councils were able to give Delridge a long-needed voice and to stop some of the most egregious projects.

Vivian wasn't satisfied with working so hard to prevent her community from getting worse; she wanted to make it better. So, in 1995, Vivian persuaded other community leaders to join her in establishing the Delridge Neighborhoods Development Association (DNDA). The mission of this non-profit community organization was to "engage residents, businesses, and institutions in creating a thriving Delridge."

Meanwhile, the City of Seattle was launching a Neighborhood Planning Program. The City had recently adopted a Comprehensive Plan in compliance with the State's Growth Management Act. The controversial plan called for housing and employment growth in 34 "urban centers" and "urban villages," two industrial centers, and one "distressed" neighborhood – Delridge. Each of these communities was eligible for money to hire their own consultants and conduct their own outreach with the goal of developing a plan for accommodating growth while maintaining livability.

The timing could not have been better for DNDA, because it gave the new organization the opportunity to engage the community in developing a plan that would serve as its work program. Extensive outreach and numerous meetings, idea fairs, and a validation event resulted in an ambitious set of recommendations. These were driven by a vision for creating a neighborhood center, adding key public facilities, restoring an historic school building, preserving the environment, and ensuring that the neighborhood stayed diverse and affordable as it improved.

DNDA didn't want to lose the community engagement that had been generated through the planning process, so it involved the community in implementing the plan through a number of self-help projects supported by the Neighborhood Matching Fund. Neighbors set to work removing invasive vegetation along Longfellow Creek and reforestation with native plants. They helped build a four-mile long trail along the creek with the goal of linking people to nature. DNDA also coordinated volunteer efforts to build parks, playgrounds, and community gardens throughout the community.

Meanwhile, DNDA staff worked to create a design and raise money for a civic center to be located on a largely vacant parcel at Delridge Way SW and SW Brandon Street. Because of broad community support for the plan, they were able to convince the City to anchor a new, three-story mixed use development with the community's first library and little city hall. The ground floor also includes retail space and the offices of DNDA. Upstairs are 17 townhouse condominiums for first-time homeowners and apartment units for 19 low-income families; both sets of housing surround common courtyards intended to help build a sense of community. The two-building development is one of the most attractive on Delridge Way ("one of the most" only because other

DNDA buildings now compete for that distinction) and includes art depicting the native plants and salmon from nearby Longfellow Creek.

Two miles south on Delridge Way, a six acre greenbelt was threatened by development. DNDA purchased the property and resold half of it to the Parks Department to ensure that it would be preserved. On the other three acres, DNDA designed and built a green development known as Croft Place. The townhouse design made it possible to preserve much of the surrounding natural area. The development incorporates recycled materials, solar panels, water and energy efficiency, and good air quality. Croft Place, which houses 21 low-income families including six transitioning from homelessness, is built around a central courtyard. The courtyard and a community/technology center are helping to foster a strong sense of community. The 56 resident children love their urban home in the woods.

DNDA has pursued other affordable housing strategies as well. The organization purchased three substandard apartment buildings from private developers, renovated them, improved their energy and water efficiency, and used public and private funding to ensure that rents for the 34 units will be permanently affordable for low-income families; some of the pre-existing tenants actually pay lower rents than they had previously. A new development at Morgan St. SW and SW 35th Ave. includes 34 permanently affordable rental units on top of a Community Resource Center that includes a food bank as well as human services and other resources empowering families to become self-sufficient.

The priority for the neighborhood plan and DNDA's greatest achievement to date has been the renovation and reuse of Cooper Elementary School. The three story brick building, prominently located at the northern gateway to the community, had stood

boarded shut for 16 years. What should have been a source of pride was instead a symbol of the neglect and disinvestment experienced by the community. In 2003, an impassioned community persuaded the School District to sell the building to DNDA. DNDA then consulted the community to determine how the 1917 school, which had recently been added to the National Register of Historic Places, could best be reused. Community members united around a vision of creating a space for the many young people and diverse cultures of Delridge. They launched a capital campaign and raised the public and private funds needed to completely renovate the former school.

About 3000 proud community members attended the grand opening of the rechristened Youngstown Cultural and Arts Center in January of 2006. The 18,000 square foot ground floor had been sensitively renovated to include a 150 seat performance theatre, a dance studio, a recording studio, a computer center, classrooms for a school of students who have dropped out or been expelled from other schools, and offices for four youth arts organizations. These organizations program the space together with the 36 low-income artists who live and work in the renovated classrooms above. On any given night, community members can take classes in everything from belly dancing to life drawing and participate in events ranging from a Cambodian film festival to a Seattle Symphony concert to a performance of hip hop. Most importantly, though, Youngstown is a space where young people are treated as an asset and where Delridge's many cultures come together to create a unified community.

Conclusion

The Neighborhood Planning Program and the Neighborhood Matching Fund reflect a new approach to working with neighborhoods. Rather than viewing

neighborhoods simply as places with needs, the new focus is on neighborhoods as communities of people with untapped resources. Both government and citizens are moving beyond the idea that urban problems are the responsibility of government alone. Under the new paradigm, processes of citizen participation are giving way to programs of community empowerment. While citizen participation involved citizens in the city's priorities through public hearings, task forces, and other government processes, community empowerment provides citizens with the support they need to address their own priorities through their own organizations.

None of this is meant to suggest that there is no longer a role for government. While the community provides a local perspective, government must look citywide to ensure that neighborhoods are connected and that each is treated equitably. Likewise, community innovation needs to be balanced by a certain amount of government standards and regulations. My point is simply that cities are at their best when local government and the community are working together as true partners.

Endnote

This paper is adapted, in part, from *Neighbor Power: Building Community the Seattle Way*, University of Washington Press, December, 2004. Information on the book is available at: www.neighborpower.org