EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES THROUGH SEATTLE'S DEPARTMENT OF NEIGHBORHOODS[1]

Jim Diers

Local governments throughout the United States are facing a dual dilemma. Their resources are not keeping pace with increasingly complex social issues, especially when the federal and state governments are devolving more responsibilities than money to them. Voters are reluctant to approve additional resources because they feel a sense of alienation from their government at all levels.

The common response has been to "reinvent government" to be more like a business with a greater emphasis on "efficiency" and "customer service." Although it is true that government needs to improve its business practices, there is a danger inherent in treating citizens as customers. To the extent that government treats citizens only as customers, citizens think of themselves only as taxpayers and feel that much more alienated from their government.

This deep sense of alienation is often misdiagnosed as apathy. Statistics showing that fewer and fewer people are voting and are joining community organizations have led some to the conclusion that increasing numbers of citizens no longer care about their community or their government. This analysis, I believe, blames the victim. Citizens don't vote because they have seen little evidence that their votes matter. The 2000 presidential election only confirmed what so many people already suspected: their votes didn't count. Likewise, people hesitate to join community organizations because they are tired of attending meetings that lead to nothing but more meetings. Whether they are participating in a planning workshop or a discussion of bylaws, too many people have a hard time seeing a positive relationship between their civic involvement and the quality of their lives.

I am convinced that people still yearn for a sense of community and want to contribute to the greater good. They also want a voice in their government. What they are looking for has less to do with reinventing government than it does with rediscovering democracy. True democracy requires deeper involvement than going to the voting booth once a year; people need to be engaged in their communities and with their government on an ongoing basis. People will commit to such involvement to the extent that they see results.

I say this with confidence because of the high level of citizen engagement I witnessed in Seattle between 1988 and 2002. Tens of thousands of people participated in implementing more than 2,000 community self-help projects such as building new parks and playgrounds, renovating community facilities, recording oral histories, and creating public art. Thirty thousand people guided the development of 37 neighborhood plans. Scores of new ethnic organizations and neighborhood-based residential, business, arts, history, and environmental organizations were established. Five thousand people a year were involved in cultivating plots at 62 community gardens that they built themselves. Organizations celebrated an annual Neighbor Appreciation Day, and individuals delivered 18,000 greeting cards to caring neighbors. Many people with developmental disabilities and other formerly marginalized citizens participated in community life for the first time. These are some of the many activities that accounted for survey results showing that 43 percent of Seattle's adults regularly volunteered their time for the community and 62 percent participated in at least one neighborhood or community organization.

Civic engagement created additional resources for the public good. P-Patch community garden volunteers generated 10 tons of organic produce for food banks each year and maintain more than 17 acres of public space. Community members invested more than $30 million worth of their own cash, materials, and labor in completing over 2,000 projects that they initiated. Likewise, broad-based ownership of the 37 neighborhood plans led to voter approval of three ballot measures worth $470 million for library, community center, and park improvements recommended in the plans.

Perhaps more important than the financial and other material benefits of civic engagement are the social benefits of a stronger sense of community. No amount of public-safety spending can buy the kind of security that comes from neighbors watching out for one another. Similarly, neighbors supporting latchkey children or housebound seniors can provide a kind of personal care that social service agencies can't replicate.

There are other things that communities can do better than government. Community members have local knowledge and can provide a local perspective. At the same time, they think more holistically than government departments that tend to specialize in specific functions.

The community is often more innovative than the city bureaucracy and can constitute a powerful force for change. When the City of Seattle planned to build incinerators to deal with its garbage problem, the community demanded a recycling program instead. When electricity rates escalated after the City bought into a nuclear power project, the community pushed for a model conservation program. It was the community

that introduced the Seattle Police Department to community policing and insisted on its implementation.

Likewise, the community has power where city government does not. The City couldn't persuade the Seattle School District to host community school programs, but the community did. Government couldn't evict a pornographer from the sole theater in Seattle's Columbia City neighborhood, but the community did.

None of this is meant to suggest that there is no 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. Community innovation needs to be balanced by a certain amount of government standards and regulations. My point is simply that cities work best when local government and the community are working as partners.

True partnership requires government to move beyond promoting citizen participation to facilitating community empowerment. Citizen participation implies government involving citizens in its own priorities through its own processes (such as public hearings and task forces) and programs (such as block watch and adopt-a-street). Community empowerment, on the other hand, means giving citizens the tools and resources they need to address their own priorities through their own organizations.

In 1988, the City of Seattle had long been known if seldom commended for its emphasis on process. That year, the City made a sea change toward community empowerment with the creation of a four-person Office of Neighborhoods. The office quickly grew into a department that, by 2002, had nearly 100 employees and a budget of $12 million a year. The Department of Neighborhoods differs from other City departments which are responsible for separate functions such as transportation, public safety, human services, or parks and recreation. Neighborhoods is the only department focused on the way citizens have organized themselves: by community. That unique focus enables the Department to decentralize and coordinate City services, to cultivate a greater sense of community and nurture broad-based community organizations, and to work in partnership with these organizations to improve neighborhoods by building on each one's special character.

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. From $150,000 in 1989, the program grew to $4.5 million by 2001, a year in which it supported over 400 neighborhood-based 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 program has also yielded additional resources, numerous innovations, and new partnerships between communities and city government.

Over its first 13 years, the Neighborhood Matching Fund backed more than 2,000 projects. Community groups 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 neighborhood of Seattle.

In 1991, the Neighborhood Matching Fund was recognized by the Ford Foundation and Kennedy School of Government at Harvard as one of the 10 most innovative local government programs in the United States. The program has, in turn, fostered many innovations of its own. To name just a few, the Fund has been used to create Seattle's first wheelchair-accessible playground (Alki), drug-free zone (Garfield), community school (Powerful Schools), intergenerational oral history (African American community), use of murals to combat graffiti (Central Neighborhood Association), reforestation with native plants (College Street Ravine), reuse of rainwater (Cascade), "gray to green" conversion of asphalt to park (former Webster School), restoration of a wetland to drain a ballfield (Meadowbrook), and use of a troll to spark economic development (Fremont). The community, which initiated all of these projects, tends to be more creative than the bureaucracy.

In Seattle, the bureaucracy has learned over time to accept, if not wholeheartedly embrace, community innovations. That certainly wasn't true initially. When I first talked with the director of the Department of Parks and Recreation about the Neighborhood Matching Fund, her reaction was, "We don't want people messing with our parks." I bit my tongue for a change and listened. She had legitimate concerns. "What about liability for volunteer work? Who will enforce our department's standards? Where will our department find time to be involved in these projects? How will the improvements be maintained?"

We worked with Parks and other City departments to figure out how to make the program work for them. We found a carrier for liability insurance. We agreed not to fund any project unless it had been reviewed and approved by the appropriate departments. The Neighborhood Matching Fund pays for two positions in Parks and one in Transportation, providing

guidance to the community and a liaison to other staff members in those departments. All project contracts include provisions for ongoing maintenance by the community, the appropriate department, or both.

Now Parks and Recreation is one of the Neighborhood Matching Fund's strongest advocates. Rather than saying no to community ideas that Parks can't afford, the Fund gives the department a way to meet the community half-way. If an idea has a lot of community support, that is an opportunity for Parks to work collaboratively with the community. If the community support doesn't materialize, Parks isn't seen as the obstacle. The Department of Parks and Recreation has developed many more positive relationships with communities as a result of the Matching Fund. Parks has also found that community members take care of the projects they create, often utilizing the department's Adopt-a-Park program. Seattle Transportation, the Arts Commission, Seattle Public Utilities, and the School District have had similar conversion experiences.

Of course, a big incentive for departmental participation is the additional resources. Besides the $23 million contributed by the Neighborhood Matching Fund between 1989 and 2001, the community has generated more than $30 million in match. Every dollar invested by the program in recent years has leveraged an average of $1.60 in community match.

A large portion of the match has come in the form of volunteer labor. At last count, over 700,000 volunteer hours had been contributed to projects. Many hours of skilled labor have also been donated. Together, these skilled and unskilled volunteers account for tens of thousands of people, many of whom have become involved in their community and with their local government for the first time.

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. They know their involvement is making a difference and they see results. In the process, they develop relationships that may lead to their participating in other projects or maybe even attending meetings. The Matching Fund has proven to be an effective tool for increasing the membership of existing community organizations.

The creation of new organizations is another result of Neighborhood Matching Fund projects. Many neighborhood arts, educational, environmental, and historical groups as well as ethnic organizations trace their origins to a Matching Fund project. There are now more ways than ever before to be involved in community life.

The Neighborhood Matching Fund empowers communities in other ways as well. Not only do citizens initiate, manage, and implement projects, it is community organizations that make the major funding decisions. In the first year, when there was $150,000 available, the money was divided equally among Seattle's 13 districts. Each district council was responsible for deciding which projects to fund with its $11,538. Some districts didn't have enough proposals to use all of the money while other districts had many more solid proposals than they could support.

The next year, neighborhood leaders decided to have only one citywide pot of money so that they could compare proposals across districts and fund those that demonstrated the greatest need and the most involvement, no matter their location. Each district council rated the applications from its district and appointed a representative to a Citywide Review Team that rated all of the applications. The combined district and citywide scores were used by the City Neighborhood Council to recommend which projects to fund.

That year, 1990, there was $1.5 million available to support projects requesting $2.3 million. The City Neighborhood Council members, however, recommended only $1.1 million in awards, because they thought that the remainder of the proposals were of insufficiently good quality. Can you imagine elected officials leaving money unallocated when they had constituents asking for it? But the citizen review process is not subject to politics, and for that reason it is highly respected by politicians (and by other funders who readily contribute to projects that have the Matching Fund seal of approval). Both the mayor and city council have consistently upheld the recommendations of the City Neighborhood Council. Not only does the citizen review 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 Office 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 planning was clearly called for by the Neighborhood Planning and Assistance Program that my office was charged with administering. With no planners on staff, I had to figure out how to do the planning. I turned to the only resource available, the Neighborhood Matching Fund. With the support of the City Neighborhood Council, we made planning an eligible use of the Matching Fund. The result was a very different, bottom-up approach to neighborhood planning. That model of planning differs from traditional planning 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 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 with a comprehensive plan: communities tend to think 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.

Coincidentally, the first community that chose to develop a plan through the Neighborhood Matching Fund was Southeast Seattle, where I had worked as an organizer. Through discussions in their district council, all 12 community councils and business associations in this racially and economically diverse community decided to develop a joint plan. They formed a planning committee comprising one representative from each organization, 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 Darigold plant 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. Local businesses partnered with the City to improve the facades

of their storefronts and the appearance of adjacent streets and sidewalks. With help from the Neighborhood Matching Fund, the community built playgrounds, painted murals, and planted street trees as recommended in their plan. The Southeast Seattle Action Plan is one important reason why more Matching Fund projects have been completed in Southeast Seattle than in any other part of the city.

Other neighborhoods soon followed Southeast Seattle's example. Queen Anne, the International District, Pike-Pine, Roosevelt, and North Beacon Hill developed their own comprehensive plans. Some communities initiated issue-specific plans targeting parking, traffic, public safety, historic resources, or business district revitalization. Other groups used the Neighborhood Matching Fund to create site-specific plans for new parks or playgrounds.

Lessons Learned

There are many routes to community empowerment, and each community needs to find its own way. My hope is that by sharing the lessons I have learned on my own journey, I can make it easier for others to find routes that work for them. Because these lessons are scattered throughout the book and some did not get included at all, I want to conclude by summarizing what I have learned about community, community organizing, community initiatives, and the role of government.

The first lesson I learned is that a neighborhood is not the same as a community. A neighborhood is a geographic area that people have in common while a community is a group of people who identify with and support one another. It is possible for a neighborhood to lack a strong sense of community and, conversely, it is possible for there to be a strong sense of community among people who don't share a neighborhood. A community can be defined by a common culture, language, or sexual orientation regardless of geography.

Strong communities are those that rely on their own resources, including the assets that each and every person possesses. As the Eritrean Association of Greater Seattle puts it, "Our mission is guided by our shared vision that each member, from the youngest to the most senior, has a need to be cared for and nurtured and at the same time each one has the ability and the responsibility to contribute back to the community."

Individual reciprocity is not sufficient, however. Communities are most powerful when they take collective action. The process of building that kind of power is called community organizing.

The key to community organizing is to start where the people are at. The more local the activity, the higher the percentage of people who will get involved. Starting where people are at, however, also means respecting their sense of community, whether or not it is tied to geography. It further entails building on existing networks. Most people are already organized and cannot reasonably be expected to develop an entirely new set of relationships and find time for yet another organization.

Starting where people are at also involves identifying their interests. That does not mean promoting a cause and seeing who follows; that means listening. The organizer should be prepared to hear and understand interests that may differ from her or his own. If a common interest involves an issue, that issue should be framed in a way that is as immediate, as specific, and as achievable as possible. People get involved to the extent that they can have an impact on the things they care about. Community plans, projects, and social events are other good ways to bring people together. Whatever the approach, whatever the issue, it is best to think big and start small.

One good place to start is with community-initiated planning, which can have numerous advantages over planning conducted by institutions. Many more people are motivated to get involved. Local knowledge and values are incorporated. A more holistic approach is generally taken. And, the resulting plan is much more likely to be implemented. This assumes, of course, that the planning process is inclusive and that it is coordinated with neighboring plans.

Likewise, community self-help projects tend to have qualities that are missing in projects generated by institutions. Innovations are more likely to emanate from community efforts. Communities have a knack for converting a problem into an asset whether it is a graffiti-covered wall, vacant lot, abandoned building, dead tree, garden waste, fallen apples, discarded bicycles, wet ballfield, stagnant pond, broken pipe, or incessant rain. Communities design and build some of the best-loved public spaces which, in turn, build a stronger sense of community. A good example is community gardens, which are also a tremendous tool for conducting environmental education and feeding the hungry. If the community is involved in producing public art (and why else would it be called public?), the art will probably reflect the community's character and values and be integrated with the fabric of the neighborhood. People tend to respect and maintain community projects.

Community initiatives generally have a positive effect on the environment. While academicians struggle to define and measure sustainability, strong communities tend to practice sustainability whether or not they have ever heard of the term. In communities, people care for one another and the place they share. Just as they value heritage, communities are mindful of future generations. They are also more self-sufficient and less reliant on outside resources. Meeting present needs without jeopardizing future resources is not only a common definition of sustainability, but it is the goal of empowered communities.

Community school programs are one example of the creative use of resources that would otherwise go to waste. School

facilities are typically underutilized much of the time, including evenings, weekends, and summers. Yet, school gymnasiums, libraries, computer centers, theaters, woodshops, kitchens, classrooms, playgrounds, and parking lots could be put to good use by the community. Neighbors with skills, knowledge, and time to share, meanwhile, are generally overlooked by the schools. By fully utilizing the resources of both communities and schools, community school programs can benefit students and neighbors alike.

Strong communities can also play a major role in crime prevention, but too many block watch programs focus on encouraging residents to install deadbolt locks and peer through their peepholes for suspicious behavior by outsiders. Real security comes from opening doors to community life. No amount of public safety spending can buy the kind of security that comes from neighbors caring and watching out for one another.

Community initiatives such as these are essential as local government revenues fail to keep pace with increasingly complex social and environmental issues. Government can be a catalyst for community initiatives but, to do so, it must first change some bad habits. Too many local governments treat citizens as nothing more than customers; citizens, in turn, think of themselves only as taxpayers; government resources, consequently, continue to decline. All local governments have citizen participation processes, but most of them are only a charade. As Daniel Kemmis wrote about public hearings, “the one element that is almost totally lacking is anything that might be characterized as ‘public hearing’.”

Government must learn to see neighborhoods not simply as places with great needs, but as communities with tremendous resources. Communities can do so much that government cannot and, working together, they can do even more that could not be done otherwise. For example, citizens are willing to tax themselves for projects and programs that their communities request. Government can tap these resources to the extent that it respects the wisdom of the community and acts more as a facilitator than as an expert.

ENDNOTES

[1] Excerpted from Neighbor Power: Building Community the Seattle Way. University of Washington Press. December, 2004.

Assessing the Depth and Breadth of Participation of Seattle’s Neighborhood Planning Process

Hilda Blanco

ABSTRACT

Neighborhood planning is the closest practice we have to participatory democracy. As Dewey put, "Democracy begins at home, and its home is the neighborly community." Prompted by Washington State's Growth Management Act (1990), which required cities to prepare comprehensive plans to accommodate their growth allocations, the City of Seattle recently undertook (1995-2000) an extensive neighborhood planning process, recognized as a successful model for participatory neighborhood planning. The framework of the neighborhood planning process was the City's Comprehensive Plan (1994). Seattle's comprehensive plan adopted a strategy of concentrating new growth in a set of centers, from urban (e.g., Downtown), to industrial (e.g., Duwamish) to urban villages, to distressed neighborhoods. Seattle developed an innovative way of generating neighborhood buy in-it left it up the neighborhoods to organize themselves for planning, while providing them with guidelines, some technical assistance, and funds for hiring consultants (from $80-100,000 per urban village center). The City estimates that over 20,000 people participated in the neighborhood planning process that produced 38 neighborhood plans. Also, Seattle established a distinctive way of reviewing plans for incorporation into the comprehensive plan, and for implementing such plans (e.g., reorganization of city services, and incorporation of plan recommendations into the capital budget). This paper sets out the characteristics of the neighborhood planning process and examines the participatory aspects of the process, using the distinction developed by Berry, Portney, and Thomson (1993) that outlines various aspects of the breadth and the depth of participatory democracy. To assess the extent of participation along these two dimensions, this paper will rely on a review of city documents, and a set of structured interviews with planners (both public sector and consultants) that were active in the process, as well as neighborhood activists. It will conclude with exploratory findings on the breadth and depth of Seattle's neighborhood planning process.