Neighborhood organizations in the Twin Cities deal frequently with various city offices. There has often been cooperation with municipal programs for energy conservation, recycling, crime prevention, and street corner snow removal. There have also been arguments over where to put a stop sign, whether or not to build a convention center, who should hire neighborhood program staff, and what is appropriate conduct for police officers. How do local neighborhood organizations, in some cases after many years of experience, perceive their relationship with city hall? And, is there room for improvement?

In February of 1987, CURA and the Neighborhood Resource Center convened an informal gathering of ten community organizers who had worked in both Minneapolis and St. Paul to compare, from the neighborhood perspective, how each city deals with neighborhood organizations.

Participants summarized how neighborhood programs in both cities evolved from various resident and municipal efforts as well as federal mandates for "citizen participation." Since 1976 St. Paul has relied on a city-wide system of nineteen officially designated and funded district councils. Each council, through a resident elected board, selects a representative to sit on the city's Capital Improvement Budget Committee. In addition, all city departments and agencies are required to notify the councils in a timely
In St. Paul money for citizen participation is distributed through nineteen district councils (District 13 includes three separate councils). In 1987-88, $476,386 was granted to the councils. Each receives a base amount ($18,400 currently) and additional funds vary based on population, median income, and housing conditions.

manner, through an “early notification system,” of all city activities and projects relevant to them. There is no counterpart in Minneapolis to the district council system. Instead the Minneapolis Community Development Agency (MCDA) annually contracts for services with many Minneapolis neighborhood groups through its Citizen Participation Office. And, the Minneapolis Office of Public Affairs provides a weekly packet of municipal news to any organization requesting such information.

Discussion of factors influencing each city’s approach to neighborhood organizations included the strong mayor/weak city council structure in St. Paul compared to the weak mayor/strong council system in Minneapolis, the fact that St. Paul’s system of district councils was begun while the city council was still elected at large, and the diminished importance of federal mandates. Participants spoke of cooperation and respect when characterizing relations between city hall and neighborhood organizations in St. Paul, but they also voiced concern about municipal cooptation. They described Minneapolis relations as much more competitive and politicized; the results from neighborhood to neighborhood are much more uneven. How could neighborhood organizations understand and take the strengths of each approach to improve the weaknesses of the other?

Last June, CURA staff began a series of open-ended interviews with forty neighborhood organization leaders and staff. The interviews were to detail neighborhood perspectives on those city departments and programs that interact most frequently with neighborhood groups, how neighborhood representatives evaluate these interactions, and what they see as the primary strengths and weaknesses of each city’s approach to neighborhood initiatives. No attempt was made to gather reactions of city employees.

Completed in February of this year, the interviews uncovered a number of common problems and opportunities. What follows summarizes briefly the interview findings as presented in a discussion paper to a series of neighborhood forums.

Minneapolis

The neighborhood organizations interviewed in Minneapolis range in age from eighty-six to those not yet incorporated. Some are staffed by experienced professionals; others conduct business on an all-volunteer basis. Some address the acute housing, crime, and employment problems facing inner-core neighborhoods, while others focus on maintaining a stable quality-of-life in the face of external development pressures. All these organizations, however, deal with many of the same departments and programs of city hall.

Neighborhood staff and leaders interact with individual members of the city council on a variety of issues such as proposed development, zoning variances, city services, departmental red tape, city funding, and

Cover photo: A neighborhood meeting in Merriam Park (St. Paul) considers a proposal to establish a half-way house.
government regulations. Some council members are very responsive—providing timely and useful information, arranging meetings, making phone calls, and arguing the neighborhood's case before appropriate bodies—while others are unresponsive and at times extremely hostile. "If you have a good city councilperson you can get things done. Otherwise, forget it," one neighborhood leader told us.

Neighborhood actors tend to view the council's general orientation as one which promotes large development projects—especially downtown—and downplays smaller-scale neighborhood development and organized citizen participation. They cite the lack of timely information available from the city council about even its most routine activities, the allocation of development dollars, and the lack of real council support given to many city programs.

While neighborhood staff and leaders generally find the mayor's office sensitive to the needs of their organizations, they vary significantly in their assessment of its results. Some have found the mayor's office providing effective intervention. In such instances, the mayor may have brought the right governmental "players" together, lobbied persuasively with a critical decision maker, or in other ways strengthened the neighborhood group's position. Critics stress that the mayor's "clout" is very limited and emphasize the primacy of the city council and the city coordinator's office.

Included under the city coordinator's direct jurisdiction are the Office of the Assistant Coordinator for Operations and Administrative Services—which oversees programs such as Community Crime Prevention (CCP), Safety is For Everyone (SAFE), and the Coordinated Neighborhood Action Plan (CNAP)—and the Minneapolis Planning Department. Representatives from all-volunteer organizations in more stable neighborhoods tend to view the Community Crime Prevention programs and the SAFE program as supplementary to their modest capacities for dealing with crime and problem houses, even while they see the overall impact of such programs as very limited. Organizations with paid staff and/or severe crime and housing problems tend to approach these programs (including CNAP) with more skepticism, particularly Community Crime Prevention, and view them as the city's way of retaining tight control of neighborhood-level approaches to crime, deteriorating housing, and other problems.

Aside from the complimentary characterizations of some individual staff members, most of the neighborhood actors interviewed see the planning department as the agency of city government least responsive to the needs of neighborhoods. Some referred to it in frustration as the downtown development arm of the city council, while others characterized it as the department that refuses to admit that neighborhoods even exist. A somewhat different, though not as common, theme was, "The department is very ambiguous and internally divided. As a whole I don't trust them."

Of all the Minneapolis agencies discussed, the Minneapolis Community Development Agency (MCDA) received the widest range of comments. This reflects the wide variety of MCDA programs, which include citizen participation, housing assistance, and small business development. Most neighborhood staff and leaders are satisfied with the "contract for services" approach used by the Citizen Participation Office, though many believe the level of funding is inadequate and that it reflects the city's basic lack of commitment to effective citizen participation at the neighborhood level. While most have a favorable regard for the agency's Neighborhood Housing Development Division, which administers the single-family and multi-family housing programs, there is greater dissatisfaction with MCDA's Neighborhood Economic Development Division, which administers those programs related to small business development. The most frequent theme of comments by neighborhood activists con-
concerned the oversight of the MCDA by the city council, which sits as the MCDA Board of Directors. The perception is that while agency staff try hard to understand and assist neighborhood organizations, they are not allocated the level of resources and supportive political leadership necessary to be as effective as they should be.

St. Paul

Interviews with St. Paul neighborhood advocates were confined to representatives of the district councils. The councils interviewed, however, represent a range of community settings, organizational histories, and neighborhood issues, and most councils interact with the same set of municipal actors—especially the mayor’s office and the Department of Planning and Economic Development.

The mayor’s office is the critical municipal actor for district councils. The mayor reinforced this last year by establishing the Better Neighborhoods Program, a division of his office designed to be the hub of city hall’s dealings with neighborhood organizations. Using a “buck stops here approach,” Better Neighborhoods assists the councils with a range of needs—everything from trouble-shooting within the city bureaucracy to providing direct staff support for neighborhood events and projects.

District council representatives must often work individually with city council members to solicit their help on local projects and issues. As in Minneapolis, such dealings can be rather idiosyncratic, depending upon the priorities of the individual city council member as well as the nature of the specific district council request or neighborhood problem. It is interesting to note that in a few instances individual residents have had to request their city council member’s assistance to push for district council action on a particular issue. While this is exceptional, it does point out the relative strength of the district councils within the St. Paul system.

Among city departments, the Department of Planning and Economic Development (PED) engages in the most interaction with district councils. In addition to the citizen participation coordinator, who acts as both a city government liaison and administrator for the district council system, the planning staff of PED are each assigned to work with specific district councils and, in addition, to specialize in particular program areas. While, overall, the district council dealings with PED staff are both productive and cooperative, individual dealings between neighborhood representatives and various departmental staff are characterized by the same ambivalence and diverse range of comments as those of their counterparts in Minneapolis. This reflects the range of programs, staff, and issues that are raised.

In Minneapolis, citizen participation monies are distributed through contracts with groups in target neighborhoods (shaded above) which compete for funding. Remaining funds are divided among groups in non-target areas that have requested support. In 1987-88, $376,165 was distributed: $357,790 to twenty-six groups in target areas and $18,375 to sixteen groups in non-target areas.
"Our council and its operations reflect a strong level of volunteerism and input. Overall, however, councils must clearly define their local agendas and build coalitions on common neighborhood issues. Otherwise they may fall victim to the divide and conquer tendencies of the ward system."
Mike Laughlin, President, Merriam Park Community Council (St. Paul).

The city of St. Paul has incorporated formal neighborhood participation so closely into its municipal operations that neighborhood representatives have become concerned that all too often it is difficult to tell whether they are working for the city government or the neighborhoods. In addition, the support for formal neighborhood input into city decision-making has not yet, according to neighborhood activists, translated into significant municipal resources being available for neighborhood development.

Strengths and Weaknesses in the Two Cities

What follows are some of the factors local organizations address as well as what neighborhood leaders and staff believe are the major strengths and weaknesses of each city’s neighborhood participation system.

- Public Funding of Community Organizations

Both cities allocate funds for community organizations from their Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) monies; St. Paul also allocates non-CDBG funds. St. Paul distributes its citizen participation money ($476,386 during 1987-88) to nineteen district councils across the city through grants ranging from approximately $20,000 to $35,000 per year. The city determines the size of each grant through a relatively non-politicized formula that starts with a base amount for each district council (currently $18,400) and adds funds that account for differences in each district’s level of population, median family income, and quantifiable housing conditions. In areas ineligible for CDBG monies the city appropriates General Fund monies. Administration of the citizen participation grants is handled by the citizen participation coordinator, whose office is part of the Department of Planning and Economic Development.

Although district council representatives are happy with the non-political nature of the funding formula, they are also frustrated that the city has come to expect more and more work from the district councils without corresponding raises in the level of financial support. In addition, they express some apprehension about the long-term stability of this funding—especially if the current mayor leaves office and is replaced by someone less committed to neighborhood-level participation.

Minneapolis distributes citizen participation money ($376,165 in CDBG funds during 1987-88) through "contracts for services" with groups in “target” (lower income) and “non-target” (more affluent) neighborhoods. Target groups receive grants ranging from roughly $3,000 to $35,000 based on a formula approved by the MCD board in 1983 that considers population, income levels, and housing conditions. Unlike the nearly automatic nature of St. Paul’s approach, Minneapolis
target groups submit a proposal and undergo an MCDA staff evaluation that assesses the level of housing and economic development "occurring or planned" in the neighborhood, as well as each group's "demonstrated efforts or plans to encourage volunteerism representative of the target population." Each non-target group received $875 this year for the express purpose of "publicizing MCDA programs" for neighborhood improvement. This fiscal year's allocation totals $36,000 to non-target neighborhood and resident groups. Administration of both target and non-target grants is handled by the Citizen Participation Office at the MCDA.

Unlike their counterparts in St. Paul, Minneapolis neighborhood representatives seem to accept matter-of-factly that the city's support is something on which they cannot depend. Having to apply and compete for their funding, most Minneapolis groups place little faith in the long-term stability of public funding.

In summary, St. Paul provides relatively stable though increasingly inadequate funds for the support of an ongoing, city-wide system of neighborhood citizen participation. In Minneapolis, "citizen participation" monies are distributed on a competitive basis primarily to low-income neighborhoods while other neighborhoods receive a very modest amount to promote MCDA neighborhood improvement programs.

- Availability of Useful Information

St. Paul has an established "early notification system" which requires all city departments to keep each district council apprised of the department's work in the district. The citizen participation coordinator facilitates the system to assure that timely notice is given about such things as meetings, government decisions, department policy, program changes, and public hearings. Although the information provided varies in its thoroughness and clarity depending on the department sending out the material, district council staff and leaders believe the system works very effectively—almost too effectively. At times, the information is so voluminous that neighborhood representatives feel overwhelmed. This volume of information reinforces the growing concern, mentioned earlier, that the city is expecting more and more but not increasing financial and technical aid for an increased workload.

In addition to the early notification system, St. Paul's Office of Information and Complaints helps individual residents deal with all city departments and agencies. The city has renamed the office the "Citizen Service Program" and moved it into the mayor's office. The move is designed to better coordinate action on requests and complaints coming to both the mayor's office and the city council, making the city more responsive to the needs of neighborhood residents.

In Minneapolis, neighborhood organizations, across the board, complain about getting either late or no information at all about such things as city council meetings, public hearings, and proposed zoning changes. The Minneapolis Office of Public Affairs publishes a regular newsletter, On the Agenda. But without a clear requirement for regular and timely information from the vari-

"Without assistance from our council member or some helpful departmental staff it would be very difficult to monitor zoning and other city decisions affecting our neighborhood. The city of Minneapolis provides very inadequate information to neighborhood groups, and is not very responsive to neighborhood input."

Florence Littman,
President, Prospect Park—East River Road Improvement Association (Minneapolis).
ous governmental bodies, the information published is often too late to be of any use to neighborhood organizations. To keep informed, neighborhood staff and leaders spend an inordinate amount of time pursuing information in piecemeal fashion through individual council members, friendly departmental staff, and neighborhood colleagues.

Through its Coordinated Neighborhood Action Program (CNAP), Minneapolis also has an "Eyes of the City" program which monitors neighborhood problems such as trash and dilapidated housing through a centralized phone system that receives information from city employees and directs it to the appropriate city department.

- Peer Cooperation

The St. Paul citizen participation coordinator holds regular monthly meetings to bring district council staff organizers up to date on a range of city programs that deal with neighborhoods. The meetings focus more on providing information than on facilitating conversation, but they do bring organizers together on a regular basis.

In Minneapolis, there is no regular effort by the city to convene neighborhood staff or leaders. Any neighborhood-oriented coordination is handled in-house among city staff. In recent years, the closest city government has come to publicly promoting cooperation among neighborhood organizations was its initial support for the Neighborhood Resource Center.

- Staffing of Neighborhood Programs and Organizations

In both cities, the neighborhood organizations supported with citizen participation monies hire their own staff. In St. Paul, all neighborhoods are represented by staffed district councils. In Minneapolis, staffed organizations are found primarily in "target" neighborhoods while the more affluent neighborhoods generally rely on all-volunteer organizations.

Minneapolis' staffing of the city's neighborhood oriented programs is concentrated in the assistant city coordinator's Office for Operations and the Minneapolis Community Development Agency (MCDA). According to many neighborhood activists, staff assignments out of the assistant city coordinator's office do not include assistance or even cooperation with existing neighborhood organizations. While some of these staff coordinate their efforts with neighborhood groups, relations are idiosyncratic, depending on the staff member and neighborhood representative involved. MCDA staffing of neighborhood programs, on the other hand, is more often focused on assisting or coordinating efforts with neighborhood groups. Citizen participation staff, particularly, maintain excellent personal rapport with neighborhood groups.

In St. Paul neighborhood oriented staffing and program functions are concentrated in the mayor's office and the Department of Planning and Economic Development (PED). Through its better neighborhoods initiative, the mayor's office has established a high-visibility priority for city departments to maintain cooperative working relationships with district councils. Even so, relationships between neighborhood organizations and city departments vary considerably according to the tasks and individuals involved. A number of PED staff carry out explicitly neighborhood-focused responsibilities. In addition to the citizen participation coordinator, the department's planning staff are each assigned to work on physical planning with a particular district council and many also work on specific programs with other councils as well.

In summary, Minneapolis relies on its municipal staff in the assistant city coordinator's office to address problems at the neighborhood level. It also contracts with neighborhood organizations to carry out and promote city programs through the MCDA. By contrast, St. Paul's neighborhood program staffing is formally directed toward assisting district councils with their own neighborhood improvement efforts.

Municipal vs. Neighborhood Control

The answer to the question, "Who's controlling the neighborhood's agenda?" may have more to do with the neighborhood and the state of its organization than with the city government to which it relates. Nevertheless, the systems for dealing with neighborhood organization in Minneapolis and St. Paul are so different that they tend to affect the neighborhood agenda in different ways.

In Minneapolis, city policy puts neighborhood groups into a "sink or swim" posture. If they want to get anything done, they must quickly learn the rules of the political game as played in city hall. In some neighborhoods this has produced strong and very capable organizations; in other neighborhoods residents virtually go without neighborhood organizations, and in still others many efforts have been made to organize, but with disappointing results.

In St. Paul, the municipal system is cooperative and responsive to neighborhood input. Yet, district councils often find themselves reacting to "lots of little things" from city hall, which make it difficult for some councils to create their own strong agendas. Activists worry that if the current mayor is succeeded by someone less supportive of neighborhoods, the system will not have the grassroots strength necessary to maintain all of the current priorities.

It was clear in the interviews that Minneapolis organizations are hostile toward the system and more likely to blame external forces (the city council, the planning commission, or the city coordinator's office for example) if their organizational priorities are sidetracked. In St. Paul, on the other hand, organizations seem to believe that the system is there to help them and are more likely to blame themselves if their priorities are sidetracked.

Conclusions

Neighborhood staff and leaders in Minneapolis believe the city has little, if any, interest in organized citizen participation in decisions by the city council, the planning commission, or the various other city departments. Lack of adequate and timely information, lack of funding for staffed neighborhood organizations on a city-wide basis, lack of neighborhood input in the design of neighborhood-oriented programs are all cited as evidence of this lack of interest. Minneapolis' targeted strategy has meant that only a few neighborhood organizations have received sufficient funding to effectively monitor government activities, while neighborhoods on the rest of the city must rely on their own resources if they are to develop a proactive response to help shape the neighborhoods' growth and change.

St. Paul displays a strong interest in citywide, organized citizen participation as evidenced by the district council system, the early notification system, distribution of funds, and city staffing assignments for neighborhood programs. While Minneapolis groups search for timely information about what the city council is doing, St. Paul groups are concerned that the government may be too involved, and they worry about salaries and career ladders for their staff organizers. Ironically, the district council system is such a well-used mechanism for the agendas of various city offices that many district councils have difficulty making room for their own issues, developing their own priorities, and asserting their own concerns effectively.

Even though the role of neighborhood organizations is very different in Minneapolis and St. Paul, each city government seems increasingly to recognize the importance of neighborhoods and neighborhood-level policies and programs for the ongoing vitality of the city's quality of life. From the neighborhood perspective, however, the strength of citizen participation depends upon the strength of community leadership and the commitment and skills of individual neighborhood organizations rather than on formal systems for citizen participation or on official neglect of neighborhood organizations. Regardless of municipal attitudes, it is up to the citizen leaders in each neighborhood, either individually or in coalition with other neighborhoods, to see that their participation is taken seriously.

In Minneapolis, the challenge for neigh-
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