Neighborhood Revitalization for Whom?

by Mara S. Sidney and Edward G. Goetz

Since its inauguration in 1991, the Minneapolis Neighborhood Revitalization Program (NRP) has been hailed as democracy in action and criticized as a mechanism for small groups of residents to further their special interests. In some neighborhoods, residents have joined together to discuss problems and propose solutions; in other neighborhoods, residents have split into factions, battling for control of the neighborhood organization and its agenda. Two years after the program’s inception, we began a CURA study to determine NRP’s impact on neighborhood organizations in Minneapolis. We wondered why NRP seemed to be tearing apart some neighborhoods and not others.

Our study examines the changes taking place in neighborhood groups as they participate in the NRP, so we studied groups before and after they had undertaken the NRP planning process. Our sample included the Whittier Alliance, the Stevens Square Community Organization, and the Jordan Area Community Council, all among the first organizations to finish the planning process. We conducted intensive in-person interviews with neighborhood organization activists and city staff members. We also examined each neighborhood’s NRP plan, minutes from each group’s board meetings over the period of study, and neighborhood newspaper accounts of each group’s activities.

The NRP brings together residents and government officials to design and implement long-range plans for the revitalization and strengthening of the city’s neighborhoods. Community organizations develop neighborhood plans and then work with city, county, park, school, library, and other officials to implement the programs and services in their plans. The NRP is innovative both for the responsibility it devolves to community organizations and for the degree of intergovernmental cooperation it seeks to induce among the various jurisdictions that affect the neighborhoods. The city plans to make $20 million a year available to neighborhoods for twenty years to fund programs identified in the neighborhood plans.

The Whittier Alliance

About 13,000 people live in the Whittier neighborhood, two miles south of downtown Minneapolis. The population is more racially diverse and poorer than the city as a whole.

In Whittier, housing policy has shifted from rehabilitating problem rental buildings to encouraging home ownership. Here the new housing development director, David Wilson, stands in a four-unit building that the Whittier Alliance converted to two units. The units will be sold separately.
Whittier’s housing stock includes large and small apartment buildings, duplexes, and single-family homes; 90 percent of the neighborhood’s housing units are rented. Whittier’s neighborhood group, the Whittier Alliance, acts both as a citizen participation organization and a community development corporation, setting and implementing Whittier’s agenda for housing, economic development, social service provision, and anti-crime efforts. During most of the 1980s, the alliance’s housing strategy was based on the development of leasehold co-ops. The alliance purchased and rehabilitated problem buildings, then ran them as tenant cooperatives. A smaller program rehabilitated single-family homes, selling them at market value. An active anti-crime strategy also was in place.

The content of Whittier’s NRP plan was consistent with these strategies. It called for stepped up co-op development and a higher rate of homeownership development in anticipation of greater resources. Anti-crime activities would continue, and a broad array of social services was to be coordinated by the alliance throughout the neighborhood. But a year after beginning the NRP process, when the alliance held a meeting to hear final comments about the plan before it was presented to the city, a group of homeowners spoke out against it. They objected specifically to the continued development of multifamily projects and to the plan’s social service component. This group began working to gain influence in the neighborhood, and at the next annual meeting in March 1992, a record turnout of more than 200 residents elected seven new board members and re-elected eight incumbents. Days before the election, a flyer signed by five homeowners was distributed denouncing the NRP plan and urging neighbors to attend the meeting. These five homeowners were elected; the new board president stated, “The new hue and cry is: ‘No more multifamily low-income cooperative housing,’ I think we’ve done our fair share.”

The newly elected alliance board members did not bring about a demographic change in the board’s composition (Figure 1). Indeed, our respondents agreed that the past five boards have failed to represent the neighborhood’s diversity. American Indians, Asians, Hispanics, low-income residents, and tenants have been unrepresented or underrepresented on the board for many years. The strong homeowner representation and the racial makeup of the board have changed little throughout the NRP upheaval, though there has been an increase in the number of business owners and landlords serving on the board. Nonetheless, according to a past board member, while the pre-NRP board was dominated by homeowners, these board members did not see themselves as representing only homeowner interests on the board. Current board members, in contrast, act in a self-consciously self-interested manner. They see themselves as representing the “stakeholders” of the neighborhood, who they define as property owners.

The 1992 election shifted the ideological makeup of the board toward the protection of property interests. This shift resulted in staff changes at the alliance, which have continued for almost two years. After the election, tension developed between the alliance board and the staff, and within six months several changes were made, including the positions of executive director, housing development director, and anti-crime specialist. After having an interim director for six months, the alliance’s new executive director served for eleven months before being fired. A new interim director was named in January 1994.

In addition to bringing changes in alliance board and staff, the NRP process has had a strong impact on the level of neighborhood participation in the Whittier Alliance. Most informants pointed to fifty-two “quadrant” meetings held during the NRP planning process as a positive step in soliciting viewpoints from across the neighborhood. Of more lasting impact, the controversy over the content of the plan led to the mobilization of property owners, and a dramatic increase in their level of participation. Elections to the board are now “fiercely fought,” according to one member, and the alliance estimates that about 200 residents and business owners are active in the organization through committees and subcommittees.

As changes in leadership have occurred, new strategies have replaced the old ones. Efforts now focus on homeownership opportunities; rehabilitation of multifamily buildings has halted. New programs for increasing homeownership, supplemental to those in the NRP plan, are being designed. Efforts to expand social services have ceased. Current board members report that the organization is more focused on business than it was before the NRP; the NRP plan includes a small business plan for light industrial development, and the board is considering a master plan for one of Whittier’s major streets.

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**Figure 1. Neighborhood Representation on the Board of the Whittier Alliance, Before and After NRP**

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<tr>
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<th>1991</th>
<th>1993</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Homeowners</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tenants</strong></td>
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* Percentages for the neighborhood are taken from 1990 census data.
Conflict polarized in the Stevens Square neighborhood in 1991 over this building at 1801 LaSalle Avenue (on the right). When the Stevens Square Community Organization approved developing this abandoned building into low income rental housing a strong faction of landlords, business owners, and homeowners emerged who opposed the project. The owners successfully ran for the board of SSCO and reversed its policies against gentrification and against applying for the Neighborhood Revitalization Program.

The Stevens Square Community Organization

About 4,500 people live in Stevens Square, a neighborhood just south of downtown Minneapolis. The racially diverse population includes higher proportions of minority groups than the city as a whole. About 30 percent in 1990, Stevens Square also has a significant low-income population. Most of the neighborhood's housing stock consists of apartment buildings; 93 percent of the occupied units are rented.

Stevens Square's NRP process took place in the context of a power struggle underway in the neighborhood that pitted renters and advocates of affordable housing against landlords and property owners. Until about 1990, the Stevens Square Community Organization (SSCO) had consisted of a loose-knit group of residents, both renters and owners, with an agenda that included anti-crime efforts, neighborhood fairs and clean-ups, and a successful campaign for historic designation of a part of the neighborhood. No explicit housing strategy was in place, but the group's review of development proposals revealed a desire to preserve housing opportunities for low- and moderate-income residents, and a dislike for any project they thought would lead to gentrification. These leaders had decided not to apply for the NRP because they were unsure what effect the program would have on the neighborhood. At this time, participation in SSCO was not widespread, and board members sometimes became discouraged. Few business owners or property owners participated in SSCO activities.

In 1990 and 1991, however, a number of owners and landlords began to take an interest in SSCO. Their concern about crime led them to get involved in SSCO's anti-crime efforts. When they learned that SSCO supported a proposal to rehabilitate an abandoned building into low-income rental units, and that SSCO was not applying for entry into the NRP, they mobilized for the next SSCO election. At this point, a split between neighborhood activists became evident, with each faction accusing the other of trying to ruin Stevens Square either by displacing low-income people or by housing them.

In June 1991, the property owners' slate of candidates was elected to the SSCO board, which then withdrew support for the low-income housing project and applied for the NRP. For the next two years, despite the overwhelming majority of renters in the neighborhood, SSCO was run by a board consisting mainly of property owners, landlords, and business owners (Figure 2). Tenants gained a majority on the 1993 board, although a landlord and a homeowner co-chair the Housing and Development Committee.

The NRP gave SSCO the chance to broaden its strategies. Thus, the housing strategy moved from one of reviewing development proposals to one including the design of loan programs for rehabilitation of rental property, and the possible creation of a community development corporation. Detailed descriptions of properties in the neighborhood are included in the plan, with ideas for their redevelopment. Described in less detail are community safety and community services programs. Critics of the current leadership say the plan neglects the crime problem and concentrates too heavily on issues of keener interest to land owners, such as property redevelopment.

Although SSCO elections have become highly contested since neighborhood conflict erupted in 1991, more general participation in SSCO activities remains limited. Activists note that NRP brought some new faces to the group, but board members acknowledge that the NRP drew few renters to planning workshops. Activists also agree that battle lines remain in place, despite the rhetoric of some local leaders who say NRP has healed the neighborhood.

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* Percentages for the neighborhood are taken from 1990 census data.

Figure 2. Neighborhood Representation on the Board of Stevens Square Community Organization, Before and After NRP*
The Jordan Area Community Council

The Jordan neighborhood in northwest Minneapolis differs from Whittier and Stevens Square in a few significant ways. Its population of about 7,800 people places it between the smaller Stevens Square and the larger Whittier. The population, like the other neighborhoods, includes a higher proportion of minorities than that of the whole city. In Jordan, however, nearly 60 percent of the occupied housing units are owner-occupied, making the neighborhood the only one with a majority of homeowners. The housing stock consists primarily of single-family homes and duplexes. Jordan has the highest median income of the three neighborhoods, although 28 percent of its residents were living below the poverty line in 1989.

Before JACC began the NRP process, the group focused its activities on issues of crime and housing. As an organization built of block clubs, JACC used strategies to address these issues based on principles of grassroots organizing, and the belief that residents could be empowered to solve problems for themselves, with JACC acting as a supporting player rather than taking the lead. The group’s programs therefore relied on block clubs for implementation. The Dirty Thirty campaign, for example, tackled the problem of poorly-managed, absentee-owned rental properties by having each block club identify one problem property in its area. The club photographed the property, wrote a list of complaints signed by residents, and contacted the landlord.

Jordan’s NRP plan retains JACC’s previous agenda, with its focus on crime and housing. The strategies still rely heavily on work done by block clubs, but the package represents a more comprehensive, proactive approach to neighborhood problems. For example, JACC moved from a housing strategy that consisted of programs to target problem properties, and the customary review of development proposals, to an NRP strategy that involves JACC in the creation of home loan programs and in the supervision of major redevelopment of Jordan’s deteriorated housing stock.

The work that the NRP plan demands of staff, board, and block clubs has meant that other JACC programs have received less attention. Activists expressed concern that JACC’s youth program has suffered and that block club meetings occur less frequently. Given that Jordan’s block clubs have been JACC’s foundation, the prospect

Figure 3. Neighborhood Representation on the Board of the Jordan Area Community Council, Before and After NRP*

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Homeowners</th>
<th>Tenants</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>40%</td>
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</tbody>
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* Percentages for the neighborhood are taken from 1990 census data.
that they may be weakening alarms many activists.

Indeed, JACC’s increasingly successful campaigns prior to the NRP, coupled with the NRP’s opportunities for JACC to take on a broader scope of activity, have caused an identity crisis of sorts. The group that once knew it existed to organize residents, and to show them how to help themselves, now finds itself under some pressure, from board members and from the community at large, to become a developer or a social service agency. Board and staff describe JACC as “in transition”—they are trying to figure out exactly what JACC should do in the neighborhood, and to define its limits. They hope the result of JACC’s reevaluation will stem what some see as growing frustration with the organization throughout the neighborhood. According to the director,

“Some of the comments I’ve heard are: JACC’s not doing anything… It’s almost like the Jordan Area Community Council has become the bureaucracy that people are fighting. Before it was the police that weren’t doing their job, or the people downtown that weren’t doing their job. Now, if a shooting takes place, it’s like JACC isn’t doing their job.”

While opposing viewpoints about JACC’s role in Jordan have emerged, neither the organization nor the neighborhood have divided into opposing factions, as has occurred in Stevens Square and Whittier. Staff and board attribute the cohesion to several factors—its strength prior to the NRP, the group’s skepticism of the NRP as a solution to all of Jordan’s problems, and its concerted efforts to emphasize the organizing aspect of the NRP rather than the funding side of it.

Although JACC enjoyed high levels of resident participation before NRP, staff and board said that NRP did help them to reach more residents. On blocks that had not yet been organized, block clubs were formed. And the NRP did pull in some participation from renters, who traditionally have not participated very much in JACC activities, although activists remain dissatisfied with the still small number of renters involved.

Conclusion

Our findings suggest that one of the NRP’s long-term effects on neighborhood groups is the deepening of the usual bias in citizen participation toward middle class, white property owners. Though most NRP neighborhoods have been able to create inclusive planning processes, the possibility remains strong that organizations emerging from the planning process will be dominated by homeowners and land entrepreneurs, even in neighborhoods that are overwhelmingly renter occupied and have significant low-income populations.

In addition, bitter conflict has characterized planning in Whittier and Stevens Square, which suggests that the NRP planning process has been unable to generate a common understanding among residents of where their neighborhood should be headed. Instead, the process has activated factionalism in neighborhoods by raising the stakes of organizational activities.

While organizational strain is a reasonable expectation in a program that devolves so much responsibility to community organizations, it is notable that Jordan was able to come close to the ideal of a collective approach to neighborhood revitalization. We attribute Jordan’s success to an organizational structure more conducive to broad-based decision making, and to characteristics of the neighborhood. JACC was fundamentally different from the Whittier Alliance and SSCO in the strength of its block club structure. The block clubs serve as the source of JACC’s organizational priorities, and represent independent power bases for community activists. It would be difficult for a faction to gain control of JACC by simply packing the annual meeting and electing a sympathetic slate of candidates, since decision making occurs in a decentralized manner, through the block clubs. In Whittemore and Stevens Square, where there are no comparable checks on the activities of the neighborhood organization, factions can more easily gain control of the group.

In addition, because Jordan is a more working class, and propertyed neighborhood, the income and property biases of the NRP model did not create the stark imbalance of power that emerged in the other two neighborhoods. In neighborhoods like Jordan, and in middle-class neighborhoods, there is less ambiguity about the purpose of revitalization and who is to benefit. Land owners can, with legitimacy, lay claim to the program and the neighborhood organization. When land owners dominate the revitalization process and the community organization in low-income, renter neighborhoods, however, the legitimacy of their actions is less clear.

NRP program goals refer to neighborhoods as if they were collections of like-minded residents with similar interests. But especially in low-income neighborhoods, agreement is unlikely about what the neighborhood should look like, and who should live in it. These issues have factionalized the neighborhood organizations in Whittier and Stevens Square, and in both of these neighborhoods, property owners have succeeded in pushing their vision. If NRP is about working- and middle-class people, then the income and property bias of the model does not constitute a problem for city officials. If, on the other hand, lower-income people are to expect anything from the revitalization process, the impacts of NRP on the structure and strategy of neighborhood organizations are problems that must be addressed.

Edward Goetz is an associate professor in the Housing Program at the University of Minnesota. He is the author of Shelter Burden: Local Politics and Progressive Housing Policy (Temple University Press, 1993), and co-editor of The New Localism: Comparative Urban Politics in a Global Era (Sage Publications, 1993). He has published articles on homelessness, and housing and economic development policy. His current work focuses on the neighborhood politics of subsidized housing and the work of community development corporations. Mara Sidney will complete the master’s degree program in housing at the University of Minnesota in June. She plans to continue research on neighborhood politics and affordable housing as she pursues a doctorate in political science at the University of Colorado, Boulder.

The study described here focuses on the impact of Minneapolis Neighborhood Revitalization Program on neighborhood organizations—a focus distinct from that of evaluating the NRP program itself. A three-year evaluation of NRP, how well it is achieving its objectives, and whether its internally defined goals are being met, is being conducted by the Center for Urban Policy Research at Rutgers University. Readers interested in more detail about the issues raised in this article may wish to read the full study report prepared by Goetz and Sidney: The Impact of the Minneapolis Neighborhood Revitalization Program on Neighborhood Organizations. Copies may be ordered free-of-charge from CURA by phoning 612/625-1551 or by using the CURA Publications Order Form at the back of this CURA Reporter. The Rutgers study has also issued two reports to date: “A Preliminary Evaluation of the Minneapolis Neighborhood Revitalization Program” (CUP Policy Report No. 10), September 21, 1992 and “An Interim Evaluation of the Minneapolis Neighborhood Revitalization Program” (CUP Policy Report No. 11), December 1, 1993. Copies of these reports are available at a cost of $10 each from the Center for Urban Policy Research, Rutgers University, P.O. Box 489, Piscataway, New Jersey 08855-0489.

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