Bridging Two Worlds: Neighborhood Planning for Community Revitalization

by Kris S. Nelson

Since 1993, Neighborhood Planning for Community Revitalization (NPCR) has been assisting neighborhood organizations in Minneapolis. And since 1996 the program has expanded to include community development corporations and the district councils in St. Paul as well. The idea behind NPCR is refreshingly simple—provide sorely needed research assistance to community-based organizations through the abundant academic resources available in the Twin Cities. This issue of the CURA Reporter is devoted entirely to presenting some of the exciting work that we at NPCR, one of CURA’s newer programs, have been doing over the past five years.

Revitalizing the Community

Neighborhood organizations play an important role in urban revitalization. They give voice to community needs and they advocate for local residents and businesses. They ask to be included when broad public policies and programs are created that mold the entire metropolitan area. They bring new investments into neighborhoods to improve what has been neglected or abused in the past. Neighborhood organizations make it easier to include citizens in planning and implementing projects that will improve their own community. Without these organizations the needs of urban neighborhoods might easily be dismissed as economically insignificant or way too expensive.

The Twin Cities have a tradition of neighborhood-based revitalization. Both Minneapolis and St. Paul have

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long provided at least some financial support for neighborhood organizations. In turn, neighborhood organizations inform citizens about community development programs and review and help initiate revitalization projects. Community development corporations in both cities have been given an active role in redeveloping housing and providing economic development services.

HOME-BASED BUSINESSES
The Marcy Holmes Neighborhood Association in Minneapolis knew there were a number of home-based businesses in the area and wanted to find out how the community could help them to prosper. Through an NPCR grant, a student researcher, Sacha Peterson, was hired to survey twenty-five of the estimated 200 home-based businesses in the community. She identified a number of common needs: marketing, business advice, help with a business plan, tax advice, office and meeting space, and financing. As a result of the study, a home-based business association was created in 1996.

In Minneapolis, the Minneapolis Neighborhood Revitalization Program, launched in 1991, has given unprecedented significance and commitment to neighborhood organizations by placing neighborhood planning and priorities at the center of the city’s revitalization efforts. It has committed twenty million dollars a year, over twenty years, to support neighborhood initiatives. In St. Paul, the city established seventeen district councils in the early 1970s to facilitate citizen participation in the development and review of city plans. Many of the district councils have used the support they receive from the city to expand their role, to organize block clubs, and to take up pressing community issues.

City-funded revitalization programs have typically relied on community development corporations to implement their housing and economic development projects. Funds are now channelled through the Twin Cities Local Initiative Support Corporation (LISC). In the late 1980s, LISC established a program in St. Paul. In 1997, LISC initiated a program in Minneapolis.

In the 1990s, many government bodies are pushing programs to the community level as devolution and decentralization become the hallmarks of public policy. The new emphasis on community-based planning and programming places considerable stress on neighborhood organizations. They are forced to sort through a multitude of issues, establish priorities, and develop a sophisticated understanding of the issues they select and the implications of various alternative ways of responding to them. NPCR was created more than five years ago as a way of aiding the process of community revitalization in the Twin Cities.

Neighborhood Planning for Community Revitalization (NPCR)
In the fall of 1993, Neighborhood Planning for Community Revitalization was formed to provide research assistance tailored to neighborhood needs. Research is difficult to access for small organizations with limited and often over-extended staff. Yet research can be vital to successful planning and implementation when it comes to revitalizing a neighborhood. At the beginning of the 1990s, the sixty-five neighborhood organizations in Minneapolis were faced with the challenge of developing comprehensive action plans so that they could make use of the Minneapolis Neighborhood Revitalization Program. While some of the neighborhoods had long standing organizations with sophisticated leaders and staff, many were newly formed.

CURA recognized a need that it thought it could help bridge—connecting the research skills available in academia with the research work needed in the neighborhoods. Thanks to a five-year grant from the U.S. Department of Education, Urban Community Service Program, CURA was able to create Neighborhood Planning for Community Revitalization (NPCR).

NPCR provides neighborhood access to the resources of nine colleges and universities in the Twin Cities: Augsburg College, the College of St. Catherine, Concordia University, Hamline University, Macalester College, Metropolitan State University, Minneapolis Community and Technical College, the University of Minnesota, and the University of St. Thomas. This consortium of schools provides research assistance to Twin Cities neighborhoods by making their students and faculty available for neighborhood projects. The neighborhood initiates all research projects and continues to be in charge of the projects as they evolve.

NPCR is governed by a coordinating council, which includes representatives from the nine colleges and universities as well as representatives from the Higher Education Consortium for Urban Affairs (HECUA), the Minneapolis Neighborhood Revitalization Program (NRP), and Twin Cities LISC, as well as community representatives from both Minneapolis and St. Paul. Combining both community and educational representatives on the council has resulted in a learning process for both groups. It has also created links between them.

In 1996, NPCR expanded to include St Paul’s district councils and community development corporations in both Minneapolis and St. Paul. The expansion to St. Paul is supported by grants from the St. Paul Foundation, the St. Paul Companies, and St. Paul LISC. The McKnight Foundation has provided major funding to expand NPCR’s program and to support research focused on restorative justice, the impact of welfare reform on neighborhoods, and the use of geographic information systems by neighborhoods. The Minneapolis Foundation has provided funding for the initiation and development of the University-Neighborhood Network.

The NPCR Process
How does the actual process of connecting community and academia work? Research proposals are solicited three times a year. Neighborhood orga-
A HOUSING DATABASE

In St. Paul, the Rondo Community Land Trust, working with the Ward 1 Housing Group, wanted to improve housing assessments and planning in the Summit-University and Lexington-Hamline communities. Through an NPCR grant, Stephanie Kellner was hired as a student researcher to investigate various existing databases and the feasibility of creating a database that would integrate St. Paul and Ramsey County data and allow easier access for neighborhood groups and the general public. Such a system would report housing data in a more timely and accurate fashion. Kellner discovered that there is no comprehensive, publicly accessible housing database for the area. Her report summarized various city and county departmental data systems, provided suggestions on how to best access the information, and recommended alerting policy makers to the importance of neighborhood-level data access. The Ward 1 housing group continues to meet and pursue their goal.

Organizations prepare the requests, but NPCR provides assistance in developing clear and focused research projects and in identifying other research resources that may be useful. Projects that are approved are provided with funds to pay for a student to carry out the project. The projects are advertised at the participating schools. Students apply and the neighborhood organization chooses which student will work on the project.

The student spends 130 to 480 hours of research time under the direction of the neighborhood organization. The student is paired with a community and a faculty mentor. To date, these student research assistants have completed 125 neighborhood-initiated projects. A small sampling of the projects are featured as sidebars with this article. The projects respond to a variety of neighborhood needs, though the greatest number have dealt with housing and economic development (see Figure 1).

In addition to neighborhood-led student projects, NPCR solicits two faculty-directed research projects each year. These can be initiated by either a neighborhood or a faculty person, but faculty and at least one neighborhood organization must coordinate with each other to create a project that will be funded. Faculty grants include up to two months faculty salary plus graduate research assistance equivalent to half-time for nine months.

Faculty projects tend to be more complex and to deal with overarching policy issues or issues that affect multiple neighborhoods. Neighborhood organizations are active participants in these projects as well. Eight faculty research projects have been completed to date. Research areas have ranged from school redesign to studying the effect of electric utility restructuring on low income households. See “Pay Now or Pay More Later,” on page 12, for an example of a faculty research project.

A number of special projects have evolved. One, the use of the Internet to connect neighborhoods, grew out of a research project initiated in 1993 by a group of Minneapolis neighborhood associations. The developing network has been so successful that NPCR continues to employ a graduate student to assist neighborhood organizations in getting connected to the Internet and in developing and maintaining Web sites. See “Neighborhood Organizations on the Internet,” on page 16.

Another was a venture into the new area of restorative justice that began when a few neighborhoods in Minneapolis began asking what happens after you call 911? Their determination to reduce street crime combined with a series of NPCR grants that led to the creation of the first neighborhood-based restorative justice program in the country that is designed to deal with urban crimes committed by adults. See “Pioneering Restorative Justice,” on page 6. This type of sustained research on a particular issue with a coalition of neighborhoods or other community organizations is continuing in a number of other areas, including welfare reform and housing policies for abandoned and boarded properties.

Another recent NPCR initiative is the creation of the University-Neighborhood Network (UNN). UNN, which began in 1996, provides a clearinghouse where academic classes that include applied research projects can be matched with neighborhood projects that need student power. See “Linking Neighborhoods with Academic Classrooms,” on page 21.

Results from NPCR

Since its inception, NPCR has assisted over seventy neighborhood and community organizations, sometimes working with more than one organization within a neighborhood (see Figure 2). By the end of 1997, some 165 applied research projects had been completed. Sixty-three neighborhood organizations have worked with more than 120 student research assistants. Eight faculty research projects have been completed. And twenty-two neighbor-

Figure 1. Issues Addressed by NPCR Research Projects, 1993-1997

146 different issues addressed in 125 different projects. Some projects addressed more than one issue.
INCORPORATING BUS RIDERSHIP
The East Harriet Farmstead Neighborhood Association in Minneapolis wanted to reduce traffic congestion and parking problems in the neighborhood. With an NPCR grant they hired Shehryar Sarwar to investigate ways of increasing bus ridership and the use of bicycles. He surveyed residents about their daily transportation patterns and traffic concerns and found out about successful programs used in other communities. A list of action items for the neighborhood, Metro Transit, and the city was drawn up that would help reduce neighborhood traffic. It included educating residents about riding the bus, promoting riding the bus, installing more bicycle racks, and constructing more bus shelters. A community forum was held on bus ridership with key community leaders participating: Jim Macchitelli, manager of marketing and graphics for Metro Transit, and John Dillley, manager of service delivery for Metro Transit.

Several neighborhoods designed housing improvement programs tailored to their particular needs. A revolving loan fund handbook (Neighborhood Home Improvement Loan Fund Handbook) was developed, drawing on the experience of helping one neighborhood create such a fund. The handbook, presented at a workshop attended by more than forty neighborhood leaders, has been widely used since then by neighborhood organizations in both Minneapolis and St. Paul.

AUTO RECYCLING
The West Side Citizens Organization in St. Paul, faced with the prospect of a huge auto shredder facility constructed on the bank of the Mississippi, organized in 1995 to stop it. NO SHAMS! (Neighborhoods Organized to Stop the Hazards of all Metal Shredders) was formed to focus opposition to the siting of the metal shredder and fight for greater consideration of the environmental impacts it would have. They learned that there were alternatives to metal shredding. In 1996 they secured an NPCR grant to study the alternatives. Alison Altschuller was hired as a student researcher and her report described the functioning of the automobile industry and possible alternatives to metal shredders, including auto-dismantling and recycling. Over fifty copies of the report have been distributed and in February 1998 a company mentioned in the report, a Baltimore auto-dismantling firm, met with St. Paul officials and the community to consider the possibility of opening a dismantling facility in St. Paul.
Community business needs have been another area studied by a number of neighborhoods. These projects uncovered common interests between residents and businesses. This led to shared planning, working to create new business development and new jobs in the neighborhood. In the Southeast Industrial Area of Minneapolis, for example, neighborhood organizations and business leaders joined together to develop a master plan for the area. This has led to a close working relationship and a foundation for providing local employment for community residents who are moving from welfare to work.

In the four and a half years since NPCR began, neighborhood organizations have learned a great deal about how to access information from outside resources and how to use it effectively. They have also learned about working together. They have learned not to be intimidated by academic researchers. Too often university-initiated projects have resulted in information extracted from the community for the benefit of the academy, but with little benefit to the community itself. By keeping the neighborhood in charge of the project, NPCR seeks to change this practice, so that both academy and community can benefit.

Another change that NPCR has observed is a changed attitude among community activists toward academic institutions. This was particularly evident at a conference sponsored by NPCR two years ago, “Research for Change,” which was designed not only to reflect upon the success of the NPCR model for community-based research and the lessons learned from its endeavors, but also to discuss the dynamics of academic and neighborhood communities working together. The friendly tone of the conference was a hearty validation of the work NPCR is engaged in. The pages that follow in this issue of the CURA Reporter demonstrate in more detail some of the change that is resulting from NPCR’s work.

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