

Mesa, Arizona

Building Strong Neighborhoods Initiative

Program Assessment

With the extreme decline in Arizona's housing market and economic challenges, there has been a marked increase in vacant and foreclosed homes, as well as a decline in neighborhood maintenance and upkeep. At the same time, a "new economy" in Arizona and nationwide has resulted in decreased City resources/funding and has caused cities like Mesa, Arizona to be, as Mayor Scott Smith says, "at a crossroads." We can decide to huddle in a corner and wait out this economy, or we can use this time as a way to fuel creative, resourceful ideas to grow and strengthen Mesa.

Mesa has chosen the latter, and the Building Strong Neighborhoods (BSN) Initiative is an example of an existing program that has been well used during these challenging economic times. The BSN Initiative puts the collective assets and energy of residents/neighborhoods to bear in tailoring solutions to common neighborhood challenges. For example, when surveyed, residents have expressed concerns about gang and drug activity, safety, vacant homes, excessive noise, vehicle speeding, stray animals, inoperable vehicles parked on property, loitering day laborers, and illegal dumping and activity in alleys behind their homes. BSN helps create long-term, neighborhood solutions that are owned by residents through partnerships with fellow neighbors, local agencies, and the City.

Program Implementation and Costs

Developed by the City Neighborhood Outreach Office, the objectives of BSN are to:

- Assist neighborhood stakeholders within selected neighborhood boundaries, including residents, business owners, nonprofit organizations, faith-based institutions, and schools, in identifying neighborhood issues and concerns.
- Educate neighborhood stakeholders to preserve and strengthen their neighborhoods by connecting them with City and nonprofit organizations and resources.
- Actively engage neighborhood stakeholders as leaders in addressing negative conditions and taking ownership of their neighborhoods.
- Enhance resident-to-resident and resident-to-City-staff communication for the betterment of the neighborhood.
- Encourage ongoing community involvement of stakeholders beyond the program timeframe.

To begin the BSN Initiative process, the Neighborhood Outreach staff collaborates with Mesa City Councilmembers from each Council District to select neighborhoods that might benefit from the program. BSN is offered in neighborhoods with a variety of economic and demographic backgrounds, ranging from very low income areas to homeowners' associations that have more structure and internal support.

Once a neighborhood is selected, neighborhood stakeholders are assisted in identifying neighborhood issues and concerns through a survey that is distributed to every household, business, and property owner in the selected Initiative area boundaries. The written surveys are followed up with door-to-door surveys conducted by City staff and volunteers. An average of 400 households are surveyed in each neighborhood.

The survey results are compiled by Neighborhood Outreach staff and shared with other City departments to explore possible strategies for responding to the neighborhood's challenges. It is then presented to the neighborhood in a BSN Kickoff Meeting and Resource Fair. This is the first step in educating the neighborhood stakeholders and connecting them to needed resources.

The Kickoff Meeting typically includes remarks from the Mayor and City Councilmember for that Council District, an overview of the survey results, distribution of a City resource contact list, and a "call to action" with several ways for residents to become further involved in their neighborhood. Examples include: joining a BSN Action Team; encouraging everyone to meet at least three new neighbors to enhance their neighborhood connections; creating a Neighborhood Block Watch and consistently reporting crime as it occurs. This event also includes a Resource Fair which allows residents to meet with and ask questions of various City departments, nonprofit agencies, and local businesses.

During the Kickoff Meeting, neighborhood stakeholders are recruited to participate in Neighborhood Action Teams. Partnering with City representatives, each Action Team focuses on finding sustainable solutions for specific challenges such as traffic, alleyways, public safety, code compliance, or neighborhood projects. Team topics are chosen based on survey responses. Team members are also provided training on neighborhood leadership and other important topics based on specific needs. The BSN Initiative encourages residents to build lasting relationships with each other and with City staff.

At the completion of the BSN Initiative, Neighborhood Outreach staff compile the results of the activities undertaken and report back to neighborhood residents about what has been accomplished and to advise them on how to solve similar challenges in the future. As a final step, the neighborhood is registered in the City's Neighborhood Outreach database. This allows

the neighborhood to continue its relationship with the City in an efficient and effective manner. Residents are encouraged to continue meeting on a regular basis. The Neighborhood Outreach staff provides support for ongoing meetings and resident-led projects, as needed, after the BSN Initiative is completed.

BSN is funded with \$284,943 in City General Funds, a \$122,253 Community Development Block Grant, and various in-kind contributions. Numerous resources are brought to the BSN Initiative thanks to the innovative collaborations and generosity of local businesses. For example, recycled paint and volunteer labor are used to complete neighborhood enhancement service projects.

Measurable Outcomes of the Initiative

There have been a number of positive results including:

- Speed bumps have been installed to address concerns about speeding
- Alleys have been closed to eliminate illegal dumping and crime
- Block watch programs have been created
- Night walks are taken with the Police Department to assess safety needs
- Apartment managers have organized to address common rental property issues
- Nuisance abatement, clean-up, and beautification projects, such as removing graffiti, painting a playground, creating a neighborhood mural, and painting a blighted home, have been completed.

In the first three years of the program:

- ✓ 18 neighborhoods participated
- ✓ 5,699 households were engaged
- ✓ 1,279 tons of waste were removed

- ✓ 890 Code compliance cases were opened (80% have now been closed)
- ✓ 21 new neighborhoods have been registered
- ✓ 9 new Block Watch programs were created
- ✓ 5,031 volunteers gave 20,061 hours of service

These efforts have resulted in substantial savings to the City and stronger community neighborhoods, despite the challenging economic times.

By involving more businesses and non-profit community partners in resolving neighborhood issues, the BSN Initiative participants have learned that more resources can be provided to citizens than simply what the City can offer. The program has also taught its participants how to manage their time, work as a team, organize and activate neighborhoods, and successfully empower volunteers who are committed to improving the quality of their neighborhood.