



Innovation Award Application 2014

PHX RENEWS

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Rick Naimark

Deputy City Manager

City of Phoenix

200 W. Washington St., 12th Floor, Phoenix AZ 85003

(602) 534-3916

rick.naimark@phoenix.gov, sam.feldman@phoenix.gov

Describe the Program/project/ product/ service innovation:

PHX Renews started as a vision of Phoenix Mayor Greg Stanton in his first State of the City address in March 2012. Roughly 42% of land in Phoenix is vacant, much of it in the urban core. PHX Renews hopes to address this by utilizing some vacant land to the community's benefit on a temporary basis.

While vacant lots in cities like Chicago, Boston and Philadelphia are typically 25 x 125 feet, they can be acres in Phoenix. And while the cities mentioned receive more than 40 inches of rain per year, Phoenix receives 8 inches per year. Many vacant lots are "off the grid", meaning no power or water, so how do we do something meaningful on these lots without these services available?

First, the City of Phoenix and Mayor Stanton asked Keep Phoenix Beautiful (KPB) to manage the process. KPB is an affiliate of the Keep America Beautiful network, which has resources to tap into from other affiliates across the country. KPB has been supported by the City of Phoenix Public Works Department for over 30 years, and is housed in Phoenix City Hall, making it a natural partner for the project.

The project is on a privately held 15-acre parcel on the north east corner of Central Avenue and Indian School Road in central Phoenix. It has been vacant for over 20 years and is bordered on the north and east sides by Steele Indian School Park. Through negotiations with the land owner, Barron Collier Companies, the City was able to sign a \$1 per year agreement for three years, while Barron Collier asked for a 180 day out clause at any time.

With ideas in place, a local family foundation was approached for seed money for the project. The Steele Foundation provided \$40,000 to kick off PHX Renews in November 2012, which caught the attention of the Wells Fargo Foundation who provided another \$100,000. These funds went to KPB to administer and an advisory board was set up to oversee the spending. On the Advisory Board were representatives of the Mayor's Office, the Public Works and the Parks and Recreation Departments, as well as Barron Collier and KPB. The architecture firm SmithGroupJJR provided a landscape architect and staff pro bono to work with the community to develop a site plan based on needs and wants of the local stakeholders, and two nonprofit organizations, the International Rescue Committee and the University of Arizona Cooperative Extension Master Gardeners Program were invited to be our first partners.

A groundbreaking ceremony was held in November 2012 and for the next six months staff worked through many of the logistical issues such as permitting, design and funding. KPB committed a full-time staff person to the project, while the City acted as a consultant on many of the permitting issues and related zoning. While the property is off the grid, it does have a unique connection to the Phoenix water supply – flood irrigation.

PHX Renews was also the recipient of 160 4x8 foot art panels from a local art fair. The art work was done by local residents under the direction of local artist Hugo Medina. These were placed on the fence surrounding the 15 acres as well as on decorative panels within the property, giving the project a public art component. The project's initial partners, the International Rescue Committee, started with a ¼ acre parcel which has been expanded to 2 ½ acres. They are supporting over 80 refugee families off this property giving them fresh food for home consumption or for sale at local markets. The Master Gardeners Program is using their ½ acre space for research on urban farming and soil issues of vacant properties and will eventually expand to a full acre.

One of the basic premises of PHX Renews is to make it educational. The City of Phoenix Public Works and Water Services Departments invested in a two-acre site which will be used for educating school children and the rest of the public about the different aspects of sustainability. With the City's new sustainability campaign, Reimagine Phoenix, the two-acre site will serve as teaching space that will focus on how to transform trash into resources by reducing, reusing, recycling and reconsidering consumption. As we have expanded over 2013, we brought in new partners Madison Street Veterans Association, One N Ten, Native Health, Hayden Flour Mill, Central High School, Brophy and Xavier College Preparatories and PetSmart. We have also activated over 80 community garden beds built by volunteers and turned them over to local residents who want to experience growing their own produce. The neighborhood is very dense with many apartments and condominiums, and many of the community gardeners have lived near each other for years without social interaction. In this urban environment, it has been exceptional to watch these residents interact while trying to overcome gophers and bugs, and figuring out what grows best in what season. With assistance from the Public Works and Water Services Departments, KPB was able to bring in a City water line that fed into a dozen water tanks controlled by KPB. Gardeners can use these tanks and KPB can regulate the amount of water being used or wasted.

The PHX Renews program continues to evolve and has been chosen for the Clinton Global Initiative University (CGIU) Day of Action project in March 2014. This will bring over 600 volunteer college students to the site as well as the former President and/or his daughter for a five-hour day of service. The City of Phoenix and Keep Phoenix Beautiful are proud to have been chosen for the project over many other contenders while CGIU is in Phoenix this spring. In the coming months we will harvest three acres of ancient Sonoran wheat planted by Hayden Flour Mill, activate space for Native Health and the Veterans Administration, and add the SHADE solar home which was part of the US Department of Energy Solar Decathlon.

Short description of the importance, internal impact, and community benefits:

With cooperation from many City departments including the Mayor's Office, Public Works, Parks and Recreation, Street Transportation, and Water Services, staff have overcome many obstacles. Some of the work done onsite has never been done before in the City of Phoenix, including the large urban farming component, the use of shipping containers to serve as portable office space and even the temporary nature of the entire project was unique. The community benefits were an increased sense of neighborhood, with community gardeners helping each other at their plots and many nonprofit organizations being able to have a place to activate projects that required larger space than they had available. The larger benefit is that a 15-acre vacant parcel, located at one of the central intersections of the City, immediately adjacent to a light rail stop has been activated on a temporary basis after 20 years of no activity. When it is time to leave the parcel, most of what has been done on the land can be re-activated at other sites around the city.

What makes this a quantum leap of creativity?

This project is a quantum leap of creativity because of the scope and size of the project, the involvement of non-profit partners, the variety of activity on the land, and the very small investment made by the City of Phoenix. This project is a 15-acre, privately owned parcel of land at a key intersection in the city that has been vacant for decades. Turning this considerable property into usable, workable space at a low cost has been transformative. This project has also been used to demonstrate innovative ideas, including a pop-up dog park, built by PetsMart. The vacant lot also provides food to 80 refuge families and allows them to sell excess food at the farmers market. Instead of thinking of a vacant lot as just a potential garden, this project thought of this vacant lot as a place to build community across all aspects of the neighborhood – from community gardeners to recent refuges, from seniors to families to high school students and LGBTQ youth, and including international non-profits and small community groups. This space was envisioned, and has become, a space for anyone with a great idea.

Who benefits?

Residents of the City of Phoenix are the biggest beneficiaries of this project. The community surrounding this project has benefited from the space being activated. Refuges living in Phoenix have benefited from the food grown on the lot. Residents nearby have benefited from the available garden space and other activities. Participants in a variety of non-profit programs have benefited from space for their own ideas and projects. High school students have benefited from educational opportunities in the space. And the City of Phoenix has benefited from the space to demonstrate a variety of projects, from solar to water and from recycling to art.

How was the program/project/product/service initiated and implemented?

The program was a vision of Mayor Stanton trying to find temporary creative ways to deal with all the vacant lots scattered throughout Phoenix. Coming off a major recession and many budget cuts, a project of this magnitude could not be fully funded by the City and minimal staff time was available. Keep Phoenix Beautiful a 501(c) 3 organization was chosen to manage and fundraise for the project in return the Public Works Department provided minimal funding and office space. KPB dedicated a full-time employee to the project to make sure timelines were met and projects were completed. Partner organizations were chosen for their fit into the neighborhood and their individual ability to commit funds and manpower to execute their projects.

What risks were taken?

With an aggressive timeline and over 15 partner organizations involved, developing a legal structure for liability was an issue, as each had their own unique insurance characteristics, like government, education and nonprofits. While our largest risk is to be asked to vacate the property in 180 days by the property owner, we mitigated that risk by keeping to the temporary nature of the project and putting that in a written agreement with our partner organizations.

What, if any were the costs and/or savings?

Keep Phoenix Beautiful has raised significant funds through several foundations including the Steele Foundation, the Wells Fargo Foundation and the Anheuser Busch Foundation.

What are the lessons learned that other local governments can learn from?

Vacant urban lots are a problem all across the country. With creativity and partnerships with local nonprofit organizations, solutions can be found to mitigate and enhance these lots on a temporary basis whether these are city-owned or privately held properties. Other local governments can learn from the wide variety of activities we have encouraged in this vacant lot. Instead of looking for the usual ideas of a community garden or small park, allowing the space to be taken over by non-profits has enhanced the engagement and involvement of the community. Using the knowledge of city employees to overcome obstacles and the passion of the nonprofit community to enhance neighborhoods, we can find solutions to make our cities a better place for our residents.

What department and/or individual(s) championed the innovation? If a contractor was used, please list the name and their contact information.

The vision was from Mayor Greg Stanton, while the contact person in his office was Colin Tetreault, who was on-loan from the Arizona State University Global Institute of Sustainability. Many city departments were involved including Public Works, Parks and Recreation, Water Services, Street Transportation, Neighborhood Services, and the City Manager's Office.

The execution of the project was accomplished by Keep Phoenix Beautiful, a 501(c) 3 nonprofit organization and an affiliate of Keep America Beautiful.

Any additional information you would like to share?

While the program got off to a slow start after the November 2012 groundbreaking, it has accomplished an amazing transformation from a vacant lot that sat idle for over 20 years. Residents who have lived in the area for years have made connections with their neighbors as they deal with issues relating to their garden plots. Approximately 80 refugee families are supporting and feeding their families from the produce they are growing on site, and a PetSmart concept, PUP (pop-up park) was born at PHX Renews.

PUP is a 20 foot shipping container loaded with 5000 square feet of fencing which can be used by their adoption agencies for training and vaccinations and in case of a natural disaster can be loaded on a flatbed truck and relocated quickly to care for displaced animals. PetSmart plans to expand this program across the country as need arises. This has been a fascinating program for all involved including the City of Phoenix and Keep Phoenix Beautiful. Hosting the Clinton Global Initiative University Day of Action is a testament to all the good work that has gone into this project over the past 18 months.