
Creating Neighborhood Connections

Frank Benest

In different kinds of settings, local governments are reexamining how neighborhood strategies can enhance governance and service delivery. In commuter-oriented suburbs, communities are trying to use homeowner associations to improve communication and rapport with new suburbanites who often identify more with their subdivision than with the community-at-large. In urban environments, cities are looking to neighborhood groups to counter gangs and drug pushers and to help take back parks and community centers, if not the streets themselves.

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Local government officials must acknowledge a variety of problems in adopting neighborhood strategies. First, there is mutual distrust. Local government officials often belittle what they perceive as the limited and parochial concerns of neighborhood groups. In turn, neighborhoods perceive local government as unconcerned, if not uncaring, about their particular interests. Second, it is difficult to involve residents in helping to govern or deliver services. Suburban parents feel overwhelmed and exhausted as they return from long commutes with hardly any energy to fix dinner or ask their kids what happened at school that day. Poorer urbanites are often too overwhelmed with the task of eking out an existence and dealing with the threats of

neighborhood crime and violence to participate in municipal affairs. Third, governments hoping to contract out work to local community groups are hindered by state public bidding laws, union opposition, liability concerns with groups who cannot properly indemnify the local government, and work standards and quality assurance issues.

Even with all these constraints, government officials are looking at creative ways of harnessing the energy of neighborhood groups to achieve the following:

- improve two-way communication between city hall and the neighborhoods
- increase effectiveness of programs that require resident cooperation for success (e.g., recycling, water conservation, crime resistance)
- develop rapport between local government and neighborhoods, as well as help neighborhoods identify with the entire community.
- recapture facilities controlled by gangs, criminals, and drug users.

Building "Community" in a Commuter Society

In certain high-growth areas of the country, many commuter families are moving farther away from their urban jobs in search of affordable housing. Less and less social interaction takes place among people because homes have become cocoons.¹ Instead of playing at the local park or even in our yards or socializing on the front porch, we have created recreation rooms. Instead of going to the movies, concerts, or theater, families have home entertainment centers. Instead of going out to shop, we order by catalog or even electronically. We only open our front door for the pizza man.² And "veging out," especially as a

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“couch potato,” has become an art form.³

In identifying with their subdivision, residents are often aloof at best to the total community and particularly to city government. This is a serious issue. If people do not act as a community, concerned with their neighbors and their local leaders about mutual problems, then municipal government cannot successfully solve the significant problems facing cities.⁴

Cities are using a variety of approaches to overcome this lack of connectedness between suburban families and their local government.⁵ At the most basic level, local governments are using a neighborhood strategy for public information and citizen input. In my community of Brea, California, high-level elected and appointed officials routinely attend homeowner associations to inform residents of new initiatives, such as affordable housing, or to enlist their support in recycling, water conservation, fire prevention, or crime resistance. When public works projects disrupt neighborhood life, city staff go door-to-door disseminating “Street Watch” fliers. Staff also work with volunteer neighborhood contacts to spread the word. Several Brea homeowner groups have created “telephone trees” to pass on information, including news from city hall. In the same fashion, the planned community of Irvine, California, works with more than 100 homeowner associations, which serve as conduits of information and cosponsor public forums on city-related issues. Of course, to grab the attention of “cocooning” families, local governments must focus on emotionally compelling issues, including neighborhood safety, child care, subdivision landscaping, neighborhood recreation facilities, traffic, and other growth management issues.

Some local governments involve neighborhoods in the governing process. The city of Simi Valley, a southern California suburb of 100,000 residents, has created four neighborhood councils whose executive boards are appointed by the city council. All residents live within one of the neighborhood council areas and can participate in the monthly meetings. The city routes most development proposals for review and recommendation through these councils. Neighborhood-generated issues like traffic safety are also reviewed by them. The councils make recommendations to city departments as well as to the Planning Commission and city council. A full-time staff person coordinates technical assistance to the neighborhood councils.

Going beyond improving public information, generating input, and enhancing citizen cooperation, some cities involve neighborhood groups in problem-solving, program planning, and program oversight. In Brea, the city

council directed staff to work with the South Walnut Neighborhood Association in responding to complaints about day laborers congregating on street corners. With the neighbors’ help, city staff developed and funded a Job Center for Day Workers operated by a nonprofit agency. Anglo and Latino representatives from the South Walnut neighborhood helped plan the program and now sit on an oversight committee to ensure the program is conducted properly.

To create a feeling of connectedness and promote rapport between city hall and the neighborhood, some cities like Fresno, California, actively assist neighborhood associations in organizing street and block parties. Involving neighborhood groups in community-wide special events and celebrations (e.g., farmers markets, downtown street dances, outdoor summer film festivals) can help enlarge their sense of community beyond the neighborhood.

Finally, some cities have institutionalized their ongoing and growing relationship with neighborhoods. For example, Pasadena, California, has created a Neighborhood Connections Office within its Communications Department. This office maintains liaison and offers multifaceted services to over 70 neighborhood associations throughout the city. It serves neighborhoods by offering technical assistance and “how to” guides to groups wishing to organize. The office provides copy machines, computers, typewriters, and a lettering machine for neighborhood associations. Staff help organize neighborhood cleanup and beautification campaigns and serve as ombudsmen in assisting residents to deal with elected and appointed officials. Staff also identify emerging development and other issues affecting particular neighborhoods and suggest how groups can advocate their needs to the Planning Commission, city council, and other policy-making bodies. Of course, any local government taking this approach has to deal with the potential conflict created by staff assistance to neighborhoods that may oppose official government positions.

Taking Back the Streets

In most suburbs, local governments have not relied on community groups for direct service delivery. Some suburbs, such as those in Fullerton, California, do fund scouts and other groups to clean up litter in parks. Any coproduction of services with neighborhood groups, however, is minimal.

In contrast, big-city governments are now considering neighborhood strategies to reclaim parks, gyms, community centers, and other municipal facilities in crime-ridden neighborhoods. For example, Los Angeles has

identified 66 "dead parks" controlled by gangs, addicts, and drunks.⁶ These are parks where swings are broken, tennis court nets are missing, and swimming pools are marred with graffiti and filled with broken bottles. Real fear keeps neighborhood residents away. A recently developed Community Mobilization Plan, commissioned by the city of Los Angeles, suggests that neighborhood action can recapture these dead parks.⁷

While city police and park staff are essentially "visitors," community members can provide an around-the-clock presence. Consequently, Philadelphia officials supported community groups that picketed suspected crack houses and held barbecues and block parties in drug-infested parks and on street corners to disrupt drug activity. To create a real sense of community ownership, the city of Toronto, Ontario, Canada, has organized "neighborhood park corporations," voluntary citizen boards that direct city staff and programming at local facilities.⁸ Going a significant step forward, city government in Anchorage, Alaska, contracts with neighborhood groups

to spot and report zoning violations, remove abandoned vehicles and trash piles, manage ski trails, and manage and maintain local recreation facilities.⁹

In crime-ridden neighborhoods, direct government, intervention may be less than successful. Support (including funding) of neighborhood groups may not only cost less than direct government action, it may also be more effective in taking back municipal facilities.

Adopting Uncomfortable Roles

To use neighborhood strategies, local governments need to adopt new kinds of roles. These new roles involve using creative neighborhood-based communication approaches, helping organize community groups, providing technical assistance and other resources to existing groups, and even funding neighborhood associations to deliver services and manage municipal facilities. These new roles can be integrated into existing departments and/or facilitated by a neighborhood services office.

In addition to adopting these nontraditional and perhaps uncomfortable roles, local governments must accept more risks (e.g., liability exposure), overcome legal barriers (e.g., public bidding regulations), and often tolerate conflict between neighborhood perspectives and official government positions. The pay-offs, however, can include creating better relationships, communication, and cooperation between government and residents and, in some cases, reclaiming neighborhoods. **PM**

¹Beth Ann Krier, "The Essence of Cocooning," *Los Angeles Times*, August 7, 1987, Part V, p.1; and "Americans' New Quest, Seeking Safety of the Cocoon," *Marketing News*, v.20, no. 23, November 7, 1986, p.27.

²Daniel Whitehurst, presentation to City Managers Department, League of California Cities, San Diego, California, February 11, 1988.

³David Blum "Couch Potatoes: The New Nightlife," *New York*, July 20, 1987, pp. 24-30.

⁴Frank Benest, "Building 'Community' in Commuter Societies," *Western City Magazine*, September 1988, pp. 22-24.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶David Johnston, "The Dead Parks," *Los Angeles Times*, September 3, 1987.

⁷Jack Foley, "Taking Back the Parks," *California Parks and Recreation*, Summer 1990, pp. 31-38.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹Tom Fink, "Need Neighborhood Services? Try Hiring the Neighbors," *Governing*, October 1989, p.86.

Resources for Local Government

For general technical assistance, contact National Association of Neighborhoods, 1651 Fuller Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005, 202/332-7766, no fax number.

For assistance in communicating with neighbors, contact the City and County Communications and Marketing Association (3CMA), 1511 K Street, N.W., Suite 715, Washington, D.C. 20005, 202/628-7144, fax 202/628-6630.