

Building Popular and Effective Neighborhood Associations

Redevelopment Solutions is in agreement with many other consulting firms, non-profit groups, and local governments: The best way to work for neighborhood change is to work through a neighborhood or community association. Such associations convey a broadly shared demand for change, and provide the critical mass necessary to get appointed and elected officials to act. One voice calling for change can be effective, but its amplification by others can speak volumes to those in power.

While we generally receive inquiries from members of neighborhood associations, we often hear from individuals frustrated by their neighbors' unwillingness to organize. To these individuals, collective action would make a world of difference. Working alone, they claim, has gotten them nowhere. They've called council members and begged for more police patrols. They've rung Sanitation and asked for increased trash pickup. They've been passed off to four, five, six different offices just trying to get a curb fixed. With each call and with each visit, they fear they've made themselves even more of a nuisance, believing soon enough they'll simply be ignored outright. They reason that if neighbors lodged similar complaints, things in the neighborhood would change a lot faster. However they're not sure how to rally people to their cause.

It is in this endeavor that we can be of some help. With this paper we provide a few suggestions on neighborhood organizing to residents who feel that their one voice isn't loud enough. Members of associations that are experiencing recruiting problems

may also find this work useful, for in it we identify and discuss the conditions necessary for building both a popular and an effective neighborhood association.

Who Joins Neighborhood Associations and Why?

Typically, residents agree to organize or join neighborhood associations because there is or will be some event, condition, or land use that affects neighborhood quality of life. The phenomenon can to most be seen as something positive, like a park or school. More often, however, it is viewed as something negative, such as crime, abandoned buildings, and polluting industrial plants. Organization and collective action occurs around initiatives to encourage, discourage, or eliminate these or other phenomena.¹

Residents appear to be more likely to join associations and help implement initiatives when: (1) there is general agreement that the neighborhood is experiencing problems, (2) there exists strong social ties among neighborhood residents, (3) there is a belief that collective action is itself effective, (4) residents have hope that things can and will change, and (5) the association demonstrates strong leadership.² In the remainder of this section, we examine each of these factors in detail.

To begin, the most salient factor related to whether residents will join a neighborhood association is the poor quality of what Redevelopment Solutions calls

¹ John Logan & Gordana Rabrenovic, "Neighborhood Associations, Their Issues, Their Allies, and Their Opponents," *Urban Affairs Quarterly*, 26 (1990), 68-94; Gustavo Mesch & Kent Schwirian, "Effectiveness of Neighborhood Collective Action," *Social Problems*, 43 (1996), 467-483.

² These factors were identified in the paper "Building an Active Community," written by Pennie Foster-Fishman, Daniel Cantillon, Steven Pierce, and Laurie Van Egeren. It was published in *American Journal of Community Psychology* in 2007 (Volume 39, pages 91-106). The foregoing discussion relies heavily on this work.

neighborhood *infrastructure*. When residents agree that their neighborhood “has problems,” poor infrastructure is often to blame, for it makes the neighborhood unattractive to new investment. The existence of poor infrastructure can, and often does, serve as a rallying point for neighborhood collective action.

Infrastructure can be poor in one respect, yet rich in another. For example, long abandoned homes — with their broken windows and overgrown lawns — are considered by most to be eyesores, however they may be rich in historical value. They may also contain copper pipes, high ceilings, and large front porches. They may have gone unoccupied for years, but that doesn’t make them uniformly bad or of low quality. In fact it is rare for any piece of infrastructure to be uniformly bad or uniformly good. Few things can be seen as strictly one-dimensional, and infrastructure is certainly not one of them.

There are two broad categories of infrastructure: *physical* and *social*. Physical infrastructure consists primarily of concrete (as opposed to abstract) elements. Housing is one example of physical infrastructure; others include streets, sidewalks, power lines, and green space. Social infrastructure tends to be more abstract, and includes elements like economies, education quality, and customs or etiquette.³

³ The two categories of infrastructure are not mutually exclusive. Some infrastructure can be classified as both physical and social. One example is persons. Persons are clearly physical, concrete beings, but they are also locations of abstract beliefs, values, and attitudes that collectively serve as the basis of society’s character. With a person comes both a physical being and a collection of beliefs that can’t be separated. It is in this sense that persons are components of both physical and social infrastructure.

A key element of social infrastructure is community — an idea or ethos that emerges from a group's shared experience or identity. Community isn't something one can physically touch; rather it is something sensed or perceived upon encountering it.

The quality of a community or any other kind of social infrastructure can be good, bad, strong, weak, rich, poor, or some combination of each. Assessment of the community depends on one's perception, and that perception is based on one's own identity, experiences, or set of beliefs. Depending on perception, one may deem a community strong because of its ethnic, racial, and economic homogeneity. However, that same individual may view that same community as bad due to an apparent intolerance of outsiders.

One's final assessment of a community, an education system, a street, a sidewalk, a custom, or any other component of physical or social infrastructure depends on the totality of judgments one makes about the component. If in it one finds more positive than negative qualities, then the final assessment will likely be positive. If more negative qualities are found, the final assessment will likely be negative.

Therefore when there is general agreement that a community is poor, weak, or just plain bad, there is agreement that the community exhibits more negative than positive attributes. After experiencing the community or hearing about it on the news, consensus may form that it exhibits qualities of insularity, suspicion, apathy, and violence — qualities most would consider less than endearing.

Such assessments of community often don't bode well for assessments of social infrastructure in general. Community is a result of personal interaction, and if interaction results in tension (or, worse, is borne of it) other things depending on the quality of community, like economies, mores, and school caliber, will suffer as a result.⁴

A tense community, a community lacking in trust, is often one with weak "social ties." Social ties are "the type and extent of relational interactions that exist within a neighborhood."⁵ They are the bonds that exist between individuals.

Where "social ties" are strong, residents are generally not reluctant to talk to and ask residents for favors and resources. There is a high degree of trust among residents where social ties are strong and, as previously mentioned, such environments increase the chance of residents lobbying as a group through neighborhood associations.

Where, on the other hand, social ties are weak, residents tend to be highly suspicious of their neighbors' motives. As a result, personal interactions are minimized. The existence of a few weak connections between and among individuals in a community works to preclude collective action. If an association does form in such an environment, it will likely be plagued by insular attitudes and internal conflict.

Social ties tend to be strongest where residents believe they have a high stake in the neighborhood's success. These stakes may be financial in nature, with homeowners fearing that a decline in neighborhood quality of life will precipitate a decline in their

⁴ For a better understanding of Redevelopment Solutions' ideas about infrastructure, see the company paper "The Building Blocks of Neighborhood."

⁵ Pennie Foster-Fishman et al., "Building an Active Community," *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 39 (2007), 94.

property value. Collective action is therefore taken to prevent the former decline from happening.

The stakes need not be financial; they can also be communal in nature. Residents may wish to preserve their neighborhood's particularly supportive environment. Communal stakes are often raised when children are a factor: For parents, protecting neighborhood quality of life ensures that their children will not be separated from friends should the family have to move due to neighborhood decline.

Residents with much in the way of communal and financial interests to protect tend to forge strong ties with their neighbors. It is hardly a coincidence that neighborhoods with strong social ties tend to have higher rates of homeownership and higher proportions of families with children under 18.⁶ It is also no coincidence that, as Foster-Fishman et al. demonstrated with their study, residents with strong neighborhood ties are more likely to organize and participate in associations to protect these interests.

Strong social ties and perceived infrastructure problems are two factors related to neighborhood association recruitment. The preceding (and admittedly lengthy) discussion provided additional detail about why they likely arose as factors.

Much less space will be devoted to examining the remaining three factors, but that doesn't mean they're unimportant. The third factor related to increased recruitment — shared belief that collective action can result in positive change — is

⁶ Casey Dawkins, "Are Social Networks the Ties that Bind Families to Neighborhoods?" *Housing Studies*, 21 (2006), 867-888; R.S. Oropesa, "Social Structure, Social Solidarity, and Involvement in Neighborhood Improvement Associations." *Sociological Inquiry*, 62 (1992) 107-118.

particularly important in its reasonableness: People are more likely to join a neighborhood association if they believe collective action, *in and of itself*, is useful.

Neighborhood associations and other kinds of civic groups have a difficult time taking hold in areas where people view them as disruptive, alienating, and ineffectual.

Moreover, people won't be drawn to collective action if they see change as an impossibility. Residents are more likely to join neighborhood associations if they have hope that, through collective action, their lives can improve. This fourth factor hints at resident assessment of larger issues like the city's or region's economic and political environments. If to residents City Hall always appears dismissive or hostile to their demands, they may reason that any attempt to influence the political process is futile. Similarly, if there is citywide or region-wide economic decline and all residents, regardless of neighborhood, suffer as a result, neighborhood associations may appear to be powerless, ineffectual constructs. But if the larger political and economic environments are not demoralizing — if problems appear to be neither endemic nor intractable — residents begin to have hope that their collective actions can make a difference.

Finally, residents are more likely to join a neighborhood association if the group exhibits strong leadership. People are attracted to persons who and organizations that accurately assess the current environment, locate and marshal various resources, and use these resources to achieve goals effectively. Strong leadership is also demonstrated in personal or organizational ability to listen to and represent the

concerns of constituents.⁷ Neighborhood associations with leaders and members possessing these traits are more likely to attract new members.

To summarize, people are more likely to join neighborhood associations when residents agree that the neighborhood is experiencing problems, when social ties among residents are strong, when there is a belief that associations as constructs have the capacity to bring about change, when residents have hope that with collective action things can and will change, and when the organization exhibits strong leadership.

The more these five factors exist in a neighborhood, the more popular collective mobilization becomes. However even if an association becomes quite popular and boasts a large membership, there is no guarantee that it will effectively achieve its goals. A *popular* association does not necessarily translate into an *effective* association. However, as will be shown in the next section, the popular association and the effective association do share some characteristics.

How Can Neighborhood Associations be Effective?

Before examining the factors associated with effective neighborhood associations, it is important to clarify what is meant here by “effective.” In everyday language, being effective means achieving some pre-determined goal. A strategy or policy is effective if, after implementing it, a desired result is achieved.

⁷ Megan Meyer & Cheryl Hyde, “Too Much of a ‘Good’ Thing?” *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 33 (2004), 77-96; David Swindell, “Issue Representation in Neighborhood Organizations,” *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 22 (2000), 123-137;

Effectiveness can be determined by assessing whether a definitive goal has been met, but some goals are not completely definitive. Some are not at all definitive, but rather are open-ended or inconclusive.

Neighborhood associations and other civic groups make a habit of articulating inconclusive goals: Instead of working to prevent construction of a highly polluting industrial plant, for example, the group's goal becomes one of increasing resident awareness about the plant. Neither goal is bad, and neither unachievable, but only the former is conclusive. Gauging effectiveness is easier with the former goal: If the plant is built, the group was ineffective.

But is engagement in a zero-sum game a *requirement* for gauging effectiveness? Certainly not. There are other ways of being effective. The neighborhood association may not have been able to prevent plant construction, but if its members were present at the negotiating table or if they attended and spoke at a public hearing, they likely won some concessions from the plant developer. They may have called for and received a reduction in the plant's hours of operation. They may have gotten the developer to erect security fences around the property. They may have been able to get assurances that waste material would be removed properly. In the association's attempt to prevent construction, it will have fought for concessions so that, in the event of plant construction, its constituents' quality of life would not be radically altered. It would have attempted in some part to influence the decision-making process, trying to get the zoning commission, the city council, or appropriate legal authority to move as close to its position as possible.

If by their collective action neighborhood associations or other groups are able to influence outcomes, even failing to achieve the ultimate goal, their results would be seen by most as effective. The group may not have won the day, but it did not lose completely. This suggests that “effectiveness” does not solely require complete resolution in one group’s favor (and in an opponent’s complete disfavor); “effectiveness” also implies success in influencing final outcomes. “Effectiveness” can be gauged not only by assessing achievement of definitive goals, but also by assessing progress made toward them — be the goals definitive or otherwise. To be effective is either to run through the goal post or to have it moved as close as possible to one’s own position.⁸

Just as there is no one way to gauge “effectiveness,” there is no one way to ensure its achievement. Some associations achieve their goals by building a mass movement and engaging in months or even years of public demonstration. Others achieve the same goals by having one member make two or three phone calls.

As neighborhood associations operate in different political and economic environments, have organizational structures of varying complexity, and can have (or not have) opportunities to connect with any number of outside organizations and people, a blueprint for achieving effectiveness simply cannot be drawn. What can be

⁸ This conceptualization of effectiveness borrows from one provided by Gustavo Mesch and Kent Schwirian in their 1996 article, “Effectiveness of Neighborhood Collective Action,” published in the journal *Social Problems* in 1996 (Volume 43, pp. 467-483). So as not to misrepresent their conceptualization, it should be noted that Mesch and Schwirian viewed effectiveness as something that is not only *outcome-determinative* (that is, effectiveness can be assessed by examining results), but that is also *process-determinative* (meaning that effectiveness can be determined by the amount of effort put in to achieve a goal). In this paper, we associate effectiveness with outcomes not out of disagreement with the idea that effectiveness can be process-determinative, but in order to keep things as simple as possible for the reader.

done, however, is an examination of groups that have been partly or fully successful in influencing outcomes, and an identification of characteristics that these groups share.

Researchers Gustavo Mesch and Kent Schwirian performed just such an examination. After surveying 143 neighborhood associations in Columbus, Ohio in 1993, they concluded that those associations reporting success in partly influencing decision-makers: (1) frequently published a newsletter, (2) had high rates of active membership, (3) represented constituents of high socio-economic status, (4) represented constituents with high financial and communal stakes in the neighborhood, (5) were based in neighborhoods threatened by land use changes, and (6) regularly exchanged resources with other community organizations.⁹ In the remainder of this section, each characteristic will be examined in detail.

To begin, the most salient characteristic of effective neighborhood associations is their publication of a newsletter. The more editions published each year, the more effective associations claim to be in influencing persons in power. Frequent publishing provides residents with timely information on upcoming events, proposed land use changes, and problems and progress in the neighborhood. Knowledge of these events and conditions prompts residents to express their concerns to elected and appointed officials. If officials then accommodate these concerns into their final resolution, they

⁹ Gustavo Mesch & Kent Schwirian, "Effectiveness of Neighborhood Collective Action," *Social Problems*, 43 (1996), 467-483. The foregoing discussion relies heavily on this work. Note that, in the study, neighborhood associations determine whether they themselves are "effective." Because of this "self selection," study results should be approached with caution. Despite the methodological problem, the results are useful insofar as they identify the traits of confident, vigorous organizations. It is hoped that readers use these traits as guideposts (not prescriptions) for creating groups of similar character.

lend associations and their constituents the belief that their work was effective. Of course the more timely and more widely disseminated the news, the more often and more forcefully decision-makers will hear resident concerns. Timeliness and spread of news comes from an oft-published and widely distributed newsletter.

Frequent newsletter publication often requires much in the way of human resources, so the notion that increased effectiveness is related to increased numbers of active members is not entirely surprising.

Neighborhood newsletters may require much in the way of active members, but they are also a useful tool for member recruitment. If the newsletter is informative of neighborhood and city matters, it can work to rally more residents to the association's causes. In turn, the high level of membership makes the association more influential in decision-making, for decision-makers will likely not wish to alienate what appears to be the opinion of an entire neighborhood.

The association becomes even more influential if its constituents are of high socio-economic status. Such residents tend to be highly educated, have high incomes, and live in highly-valued homes.

Why upper-middle and upper class residents are more effective in influencing decision-makers than others is the subject of much speculation. R.S. Oropesa suggested that associations based in poorer neighborhoods were unable to find representatives with the political acumen and communications skills needed to speak to those in power. Jeffrey Berry et al. asserted that the difference in upper- and lower-class effectiveness shows elitism on the part of decision-makers. This argument suggests

that decision-makers often have upper-middle and upper class backgrounds and show affinity for those of similar background when resolving issues. Results of a number of mid-20th Century studies showed that decision-makers, their class backgrounds notwithstanding, often voted in manners that they believed protected the city's economic interests. Protecting these interests was often seen as commensurate with protecting the city's tax base.¹⁰ Whatever the reason for the discrepancy between upper- and lower-class effectiveness, it is clear that the higher the socio-economic status of neighborhood association constituents, the greater the belief they have successfully influenced those in power.¹¹

Another characteristic related to association success in influencing decision-makers is the degree of financial and communal stakes residents put in the neighborhood. As greater proportions of constituents were homeowners, were in family households with children under age 18 present, and had lived in the neighborhood for five or more years, associations reported greater success in influencing decision-makers. This is because, as mentioned in the previous section, people with financial and communal stakes in neighborhoods tend to work diligently to create or preserve safe, supportive, and attractive environments. Such environments are seen as ideal for child

¹⁰ Jeffrey Berry, Kent Portney, and Ken Thomson, *The Rebirth of Urban Democracy* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1993); Lawrence Herson & John Bolland, *The Urban Web* (Chicago, IL: Nelson-Hall, 1990), 183-184; R.S. Oropesa, "The Social and Political Foundations of Effective Neighborhood Associations," *Social Science Quarterly*, 70 (1989), 723-743.

¹¹ Incidentally, Mesch and Schwirian also found that an association's belief that it was able to *completely* influence decision-makers — that is, its ability to achieve a goal unequivocally — was significantly related to the number of active members it had, as well as member socio-economic status. The more active members an association had, the more it reported that it had achieved its goals and had a problem resolved in its favor. The higher the socio-economic status of its members, the more likely it was to make the same claim.

rearing, and aid in the financial appreciation of property. Residents who join neighborhood associations may work diligently to achieve these goals, believing they have much to lose if they fail.

Concerns about changes to land use (most likely from residential to commercial or industrial uses) were also related to the amount of influence neighborhood associations believed they had. The greater the threat of land use change, the greater the incidence of resident awareness of the proposed change, and the firmer the belief that collective action was able to lessen the impact of change on quality of life.

Finally, associations increasingly saw themselves as effective the more they exchanged resources with other neighborhood-based organizations. Connecting and working with local businesses, churches, public bureaucracies, and other groups allow neighborhood associations to increase their financial, human, and physical resources. It is likely that the additional resources and morale other organizations provide work to legitimize the association and its goals. This legitimization may signal to decision-makers that the association enjoys broad-based support and, as a result, they may accommodate some or all of the association's positions so as not to alienate its constituency.

To summarize, neighborhood associations are effective when they are to some degree able to influence the decision-making process. They are more likely to report success in doing so the more they publish a newsletter, recruit members, represent persons of high socio-economic status and with considerable financial and communal

neighborhood investments, encounter threats to existing land uses, and work closely with other organizations.

Implications and Conclusions

One might infer that for one's own organization to be effective, it must reflect some or all of these six characteristics. To ensure effectiveness, other organizations must endorse its cause, or newsletters must be published every week. Perhaps doing so will compensate for the misfortune of having a working class constituency. Acting in the interest of those with so little at stake makes effectiveness all the less likely.

These inferences are misguided, obviously, but they are nonetheless reasonable. Their implications are considerably more than troubling. The latter suggests that middle- and lower-class people have little sway in the political process, that only the wealthy have keys to the city. It suggests that those without or with very few means should resign themselves to whatever the decision-makers dish out, no matter how unpalatable.

But the characteristics associated with effectiveness are just that: characteristics. They are not prerequisites. Their existence is not necessary for an association to achieve effectiveness. The characteristics are simply the common traits of associations that claim to be effective.

That these are traits of self-proclaimed "effective" organizations implies two things. The first implication is that, since effectiveness was self-determined, the association may not have been effective at all. The decision-makers' records lend themselves as better evidence than the association's own pronouncements. Assessing

this evidence could provide a more definitive and unbiased answer of whether the work of a particular association was effective. As it stands, an association's claim of effectiveness could be due to overconfidence rather than actual achievement.

This doesn't necessarily mean that the six characteristics are incorrect. There is quite a bit of evidence, for example, that organizations with highly-educated, upper-middle class constituencies tend to be highly effective in influencing decision-makers.¹² Even if the determination of effectiveness comes from overconfidence, associations with such constituencies perhaps have reason to feel overconfident: Power structures tend to accommodate rather than alienate them.

Conversely, associations with low- and middle-class constituencies may often see themselves as getting the short end of the stick. To them, history has shown that their positions have been accommodated only rarely, and often after great struggle. This history has left them with the general belief that the system is hardly in their favor, is perhaps in their disfavor, and that most mobilizations are bound to be ineffective.

So the first implication (among other things) shows that the six characteristics are not definitive. The characteristics are guideposts or landmarks associated with effective organizations. They are not directives or requirements of them. This fact leads to the second implication: associations having only one, a few, or none of these six characteristics need not despair.

¹² See Lawrence Herson & John Bolland, *The Urban Web* (Chicago, IL: Nelson-Hall, 1990), 182-184 for an explanation of some of these studies.

Those associations with low- or middle-class constituencies are not doomed to failure. The six characteristics only suggest areas where an association might focus, or indicate strategies that an association might implement to increase its chances of effectiveness. For example, associations working in poorer neighborhoods may become more effective by first establishing links with other organizations and businesses. Through these links they may convince these other groups to help sponsor a newsletter. They may then use the newsletter to inform residents about threats to the neighborhood's quality of life. If the newsletter provides timely and weighty information, it will likely serve as a useful recruiting tool — increasing the association's popularity, and thereby increasing its potential for effectiveness.

The non-prescriptive nature of the characteristics doesn't just mean that associations need not reflect all six characteristics to be effectual. It also hints that they need not pursue them to the letter. It's not the newsletter itself that contributes to an association's effectiveness, but rather the act of spreading news. News distribution can come in a variety of forms. As their production and distribution can require large budgets, newsletters may not even be an option for some associations. For them, bulletin boards and weekly church announcements may be just as effective in spreading word about the neighborhood. They may also be much cheaper.

To cite another example, resident degree of stakes in a neighborhood is related to an association's ultimate effectiveness. These stakes tend to be financial and communal in character, but financial and communal investments are not the only ones people make in neighborhoods. In some areas and for many people, a

neighborhood's environmental quality or its provision of social justice emerge as primary concerns. The stakes are not in property values *per se*, but in the preservation of green space or in the availability of affordable rentals. Stakes need not be fiscal in nature; they only require a belief in their high value.

So while organizational effectiveness may be associated with upper-class homeowners and threats to land use, the absence of either is not a signal for failure. Similarly, the existence of weak social ties and an absence of hope do not necessarily prevent recruitment.

Popular and effective associations can be created in any neighborhood. They are not solely the province of the educated or the well-to-do. Whether they represent working-class, upper-class, or impoverished constituents, the strong association is able to identify problems, articulate initiatives around which people can rally, and marshal enough resources and enough support to see each initiative through to the end.