

**A National Review of Best Practices in Neighborhood Planning**

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## **Executive Summary**

Neighborhoods provide the foundation for a city's identity and stability. As such, changes to a neighborhood present a new set of demands and expectations on the city. Anticipating and reacting to the needs of a neighborhood is the responsibility of the neighborhood plan. However, many neighborhood planning efforts have failed to undertake a collaborative process with citizen involvement.

A literature review of best practices in collaborative neighborhood planning reveals that there are a surprisingly few number of references on the topic. Institutions such as the American Planning Association (APA) and the Urban Land Institute (ULI) have conducted a majority of the existing research. The cities of Chicago, San Jose, Austin, and Rochester, NY have all been cited in the literature as having successful neighborhood planning programs – with each city taking a different approach to the process. Further research is needed on the topic to provide planners and citizens alike with effective strategies for neighborhood planning in the future.

## **A National Review of Best Practices in Neighborhood Planning**

### **I. Introduction**

Neighborhoods provide the foundation for a city's identity and stability. Across the country, changes in transportation, economic development, demographics, and housing options all have an impact at the neighborhood level. The changing characteristics of a neighborhood present a new set of demands and expectations on the city. Neighborhood planning can involve citizens in a collaborative planning process to address current issues and establish future goals at a detailed level. In most situations, neighborhood planning has been found to work best within the framework of a city's comprehensive plan. (Kelly and Becker 2000)

This paper reviews best practices in neighborhood planning from cities across the country. A comprehensive literature review of best practices in neighborhood planning discovered that there are a surprisingly few number of references on the topic. Thus, the structure of this paper responds to existing discussions in the literature. First, essential features of the neighborhood planning process are discussed. Next, an analysis of neighborhood plans conducted by the American Planning Association (APA) establishes a framework for the elements that should be included in each plan. Finally, a comparison

of successful collaborative neighborhood planning efforts in different cities provides an understanding of the current practice and innovations within neighborhood planning.

## **II. Essential Features of the Neighborhood Planning Process**

Neighborhood plans offer an opportunity to involve citizens in considering their future and provide effective tools for examining their community. (Kelly and Becker 2000) Citizen involvement in neighborhood planning is known as collaborative planning. This form of planning brings together multiple city departments, community organizations, citizens, local stakeholders, and social service providers to coordinate their efforts to deliver a wide range of quality services at the neighborhood level and to provide a more responsive, interactive environment for residents to express their concerns and needs. (Gregory n.d.) However, collaborative neighborhood planning is not a common practice in many cities. (Myerson 2004) In most cases, cities produce plans for land use, economic development, housing, and transportation without consulting the neighborhoods that will be impacted by the plan.

An essential feature of neighborhood planning is to **organize neighborhood residents and seek their input throughout the planning process**. Cunningham and Kotler (1983) argue that neighborhood organizations mobilize citizens to express their concerns and interests, help establish a balance of power with broader economic forces, and promote citizen influence over local government activities. Berry, Portney, and Thompson (1993) provide empirical support for these claims in case studies comparing successful neighborhood council systems with cities without formal institutions for

citizen participation. The positive results attributed to neighborhood organizations are the heart of any successful neighborhood planning process.

Another essential feature of neighborhood planning is to **establish neighborhood boundaries that are readily recognized in the community**. Neighborhood boundaries should bring together socially and physically connected residents. A potential problem is that some neighborhoods may have a stronger structure and organization than others, garnering extra resources that the other neighborhoods could use. City planners in this situation must be mindful to ensure that each neighborhood stands on equal footing. Another concern is how large of an area should a neighborhood encompass? Berry, Portney, and Thomson (1993) found that creating a “participation system” of small, natural neighborhoods fostered greater interaction between the neighborhood groups. The authors discovered that neighborhood groups were most effective when they represented less than 10,000 residents. (Berry, Portney, and Thomson 1993)

The success of a plan relies on the implementation strategy behind it. A third essential feature of neighborhood planning is **involving the private sector in the implementation of neighborhood plans**. For instance, neighborhood planning efforts may identify goals for commercial and residential development in a neighborhood, however it is ultimately up to the private sector to make the decision and financial commitment. Neighborhood leaders must be sure to involve the private sector in the planning process rather than dominate it.

In 2004, the Urban Land Institute (ULI) held the Charles H. Shaw Forum on Urban Community Issues in Chicago, IL. The forum brought together neighborhood planners from Chicago, San Jose, and Austin. Working together, the neighborhood

planners reached a consensus on a set of seven principles and practices for effective neighborhood planning. The seven principles and practices build on the essential features of the neighborhood planning process, providing a useful set of best practices in neighborhood planning. The principles and practices include (Myerson 2004):

- 1. Start with Community Building**
  - a. Identify and understand the neighborhood's demographic and cultural influences;
  - b. Involve residents, businesses, civic groups, and institutions early on;
  - c. Establish trust and treat people with respect;
  - d. Know who is affected by but not represented in the collaborative process and provide them with a voice;
  - e. Do not be distracted by people who oppose any change;
  - f. Obtain frequent feedback.
- 2. Foster Leadership**
  - a. Appoint a local entity to champion the planning effort;
  - b. Decide on responsibility for each neighborhood goal.
- 3. Plan for Implementation**
  - a. Build in certainty, clarity, and predictability;
  - b. Set short- and long-term goals and establish milestones;
  - c. Do not set the community's sights too low;
  - d. Energize the long-term vision with short-term successes;
  - e. Establish priorities;
  - f. Learn from what other communities have done;
  - g. Keep the plan flexible enough to capture opportunity;
  - h. Create a sustainable planning and implementation process.
- 4. Take Advantage of Available Tools and Resources**
  - a. Offer hospitality;
  - b. Use visual aids;
  - c. Map the neighborhood's assets;
  - d. Put together a toolbox of best practices.
- 5. Be Financially Realistic**
  - a. Know what things cost and how much money is available;
  - b. Be creative at filling in gaps in financing;
  - c. Involve developers in the process.
- 6. Communicate the Planning Process Effectively**
  - a. Market neighborhood planning;
  - b. Deliver tangible results early on;
  - c. Be honest about what the planning process can and cannot achieve.
- 7. Make the Neighborhood's "Social" Capital Grow**
  - a. Know the city's political culture and structure;

- b. Engage community decision makers in the planning process;
- c. Engage corporate and civic leaders in the planning process;
- d. Engage public officials in the planning process.

According to Kelly and Becker (2000) in *Community Planning: An Introduction to the Comprehensive Plan*, the best neighborhood plans reinforce the position of the neighborhood within the community, recognizing and improving on the neighborhood's identity while also building into the plan the interconnectedness of the neighborhood with surrounding neighborhoods and with commercial and employment centers that server the larger community. The three essential features mentioned in this section are driving forces behind successful neighborhood plans. The more comprehensive set of principles and practices presented in the ULI study provide cities with a range of goals to achieve in their own neighborhood planning practice. The next section continues with the discussion of what it takes to make a successful neighborhood plan in terms of the nuts and bolts elements that are consistently found in each plan.

### **III. Elements of a Neighborhood Plan**

In *Anatomy of a Neighborhood Plan: An Analysis of Current Practice*, Michelle Gregory discusses APA's effort to document collaborative neighborhood planning processes from around the country in order to establish a checklist of best practices. For the study, APA surveyed fifty community planners. APA received twenty-five completed or adopted neighborhood plans in return. Combined with twenty-two neighborhood plans from APA's research library, a total of forty-seven plans were analyzed. (See Appendix A for a complete list of neighborhood plans)

Review of the neighborhood plans revealed a number of common elements and reoccurring issues. In all, thirty-six recurrent elements were identified. From their analysis, APA grouped the elements into the following categories (Gregory n.d.):

- General housekeeping – elements used to create a clear, navigable plan document;
- Planning process validation – elements used to make the plan a working reference document that validates the process that precedes the plan;
- Neighborhood establishment – elements that help identify the neighborhood;
- Functional elements – elements that operate as separate topical areas within the neighborhood plan;
- Implementation framework – action-oriented elements of the neighborhood plan.

Each element was further broken down based on importance: essential, optional, or optimal if collaborative planning is the goal. The following matrix adapted from the study’s findings breaks down each element by category and importance (Gregory n.d.):

**Table 1 – Elements of a Neighborhood Plan**

<i>Elements of a Neighborhood Plan</i>			
Categories	Level of Importance		
	Essential	Optional	Optimal for Collaborative Planning
<b>General Housekeeping</b>	Name of Plan	Plan Organization	Resource Directory
	Table of Contents	Graphic Aids	
	Time Frame		
	Acknowledgements		
	Glossary		
<b>Planning Process Validation</b>	Neighborhood Organizational Structure and Process	Relationship to Other Plans	
	Mission/Purpose Statement		
	Citizen Participation Proclamation		
	Needs Assessment		
<b>Neighborhood Establishment</b>	Boundary Delineation	Neighborhood History	Neighborhood Identity
<b>Functional Elements</b>	Residential	Safety/Crime Prevention	Community-Level Human Services
	Transportation/Circulation/Pedestrian Access	Parks/Recreation/Cultural Resources	Educational Needs
	Land Use/Zoning	Architectural Control/Historic Preservation	Youth Services
	Infrastructure/Utilities	Economic Development/Employment	
		Commercial	

		Nuisances and Developments of Local Impact	
		Industrial	
		Environment	
<b>Implementation Framework</b>	Goals, Objectives, and Other Resolutions	Appendices (Ordinances, Survey Results, etc.)	Evaluation/Monitoring
	Implementation Program		
	Funding		

The list of neighborhood plan elements identified in this section is not exhaustive. Neighborhood plans must be responsive to the specific needs of a community and must reflect the ideal that a community has for its future. Thus, the appropriate combination of elements must be used during each neighborhood planning exercise.

#### **IV. Examples of Successful Neighborhood Planning Efforts**

The 2004 ULI Charles H. Shaw Forum not only brought neighborhood planners together to develop a set of principles and practices, but also to showcase successful neighborhood planning efforts in Chicago, San Jose, and Austin. Though each city has taken a different approach to neighborhood planning, all have been successful in their own right.

In 1998, Chicago initiated the New Communities Program (NCP) to help nonprofit community development corporations (CDCs) develop and implement comprehensive planning processes in city neighborhoods. The NCP program focuses on three strategies for neighborhood redevelopment: a lead agency/CDC is responsible for bringing people to the table and providing project accountability, community-generated quality-of-life planning, and comprehensive development addressing multiple aspects of community life. NCP neighborhoods have at their disposal funding for two full-time staff positions, loan and grant funds, and technical support from counterparts in other

NCP agencies. The focal point of the NCP approach is to improve the neighborhood's quality-of-life through a structured neighborhood planning process. (Myerson 2004) The NCP has been applied in sixteen neighborhoods across Chicago, including South Chicago and West Haven where numerous neighborhood redevelopment projects have been successfully undertaken.

In San Jose, the Strong Neighborhoods Initiative (SNI) involves a partnership between the city, a redevelopment agency, and city residents and business owners. Established in 2002, the SNI coordinates the flow of resources from the city to neighborhoods for redevelopment projects. The SNI program consists of two stages: planning and implementation. Each of the 19 active SNI neighborhoods has established neighborhood advisory committees (NAC) and a neighborhood improvement plan. NACs consist of neighborhood leaders, citizens, and other stakeholders in the community. The NACs are responsible for overseeing the progress of neighborhood plans and act as a liaison to the neighbors. Implementation of the SNI program has drawn national attention, providing valuable lessons learned in collaborative neighborhood planning (Myerson 2004):

- City departments should organize their programs by neighborhood to reflect the fact that neighborhoods are the fundamental building blocks for planning and implementation;
- Plans should build on existing neighborhood strengths and assets;
- Neighborhoods must establish clear priorities;
- A specific party or parties should be responsible – and accountable – for the implementation of priority projects;
- Aligning the city budget with neighborhood priorities is essential to achieve a maximum impact from city resources and to avoid conflicts;
- Neighborhood and city leadership must be developed to support collaborative planning and implementation efforts;
- Planning efforts must maintain momentum. Implementing the priority projects takes time and financing – and requires the continued involvement of the neighborhood to sustain the effort over the long term.

In 1995, the Austin city council enacted a neighborhood planning program in response to a citizens planning committee recommendation. The goals of the Austin neighborhood planning process are: accommodate higher-density growth, create more livable communities, and involve the emerging immigrant community. (Myerson 2004)

The process is a year-long effort that encourages citizens through workshops and task group meeting to become involved in neighborhood planning. City planning staff guides neighborhoods through the process of generating a neighborhood plan. Since the neighborhood planning program has been established, nineteen planning areas have completed plans covering land use and zoning, transportation, urban design/neighborhood character, and city services and infrastructure. Through the neighborhood planning process, the city has been able to identify suitable areas for new housing, discover ways of preserving and protecting neighborhoods, locate appropriate areas for commercial, industrial, and mixed-use developments, improve protection of open space and parks, and make strides in improving local transportation routes. (Myerson 2004)

Another city that has received national praise for its neighborhood planning efforts is Rochester, NY. Initiated in 1994, the Neighbors Building Neighborhoods (NBN) process began as an effort to get citizens involved in planning the future of their neighborhoods. NBN consolidated Rochester's thirty-seven neighborhoods into ten neighborhood planning sectors. Each sector then formed a committee of diverse local stakeholders that was provided with a trained professional facilitator and member of the city planning staff. The neighborhood planning sectors have the responsibility of developing a broad-based action plan and asset resource map. As an innovation in

neighborhood planning, the sector groups use an electronic reporting system and database known as NeighborLink to track the results of each sector plan and facilitate discussions between sectors and city departments. Further, a NBN priority board and neighborhood empowerment teams (NET) have been established to maintain a long-term vision of neighborhood planning and ensure that action plan goals are met. Through structure and coordination, the NBN program has been an immense success.

## **V. Conclusion**

Neighborhood planning decisions have an impact in our daily lives. Hence, it is important to recognize and implement strategies that best address issues and concerns in the neighborhoods that we live in. Neighborhood planning literature has only begun to identify best practices. Further research is needed on the topic to provide planners and citizens alike with effective strategies for neighborhood planning in the future.

## Appendix A

Southeast Arvada Neighborhood, 1980 – Arvada, CO  
Cheery Creek Neighborhood, 1986 – Denver, CO  
Highland Neighborhood, 1986 – Denver, CO  
Ft. Lauderdale Neighborhood Master Plan Program, 1986 – Ft. Lauderdale, FL  
Coronado Neighborhood, 1986 – Phoenix, AZ  
Curtis Park Neighborhood, 1987 – Denver, CO  
West Side Neighborhood, 1989 – Fort Collins, CO  
North Shore Neighborhood, 1990 – St. Petersburg, FL  
Aylesford – East University Small Area Plan, 1991 – Lexington, KY  
Kendall-Whittier Neighborhood, 1991 – Tulsa, OK  
Northwest Plan, 1991 – Columbus, OH  
Fox Hill Neighborhood, 1992 – Hampton, VA  
Champaign Comprehensive Neighborhood Plan Program, 1992 – Champaign, IL  
Roser Park Neighborhood Plan, 1992 – St. Petersburg, FL  
Second Ward Neighborhood, 1992 – Houston, TX  
Broadway Neighborhood, 1992 – Rock Island, IL  
Campus Evergreen Neighborhood, 1992 – Bremerton, WA  
Old Southeast Neighborhood, 1993 – St. Petersburg, FL  
Childs Park Neighborhood, 1993 – St. Petersburg, FL  
Irvington Neighborhood, 1993 – Portland, OR  
Kenton Neighborhood, 1993 – Portland, OR  
Piedmont Neighborhood, 1993 – Portland, OR  
Woodlawn Neighborhood, 1992 – Portland, OR  
King Neighborhood, 1993 – Portland, OR  
Arbor Lodge Neighborhood, 1993 – Portland, OR  
Boise Neighborhood, 1993 – Portland, OR  
Eliot Neighborhood, 1993 – Portland, OR  
Concordia Neighborhood, 1993 – Portland, OR  
Humboldt Neighborhood, 1993 – Portland, OR  
Sabin Neighborhood, 1993 – Portland, OR  
Northgate Neighborhood, 1993 – Seattle, WA  
Lewisburg Neighborhood, 1993 – Covington, KY  
Southeast Community Plan, 1993 – Baltimore, MD  
Chicago Addition Plan, 1993 – Rock Island, IL  
University Medical Central Valley Hospital Plan, 1994 – Las Vegas, NV  
Poco Way Neighborhood Revitalization Strategy, 1994 – San Diego, CA  
Hickory Neighborhood Planning Process, 1994 – Hickory, NC  
Douglas Park, 1994 – Rock Island, IL  
North Midtown Neighborhood, 1995 – Jackson, MS  
Northeast Greeley Neighborhood, 1995 – Greeley, CO  
Laurel/Nikomis Neighborhood, 1995 – Sarasota, FL  
Bee Ridge Neighborhood, 1995 – Sarasota, FL  
Longview Neighborhood, 1996 – Rock Island, IL  
Keystone Neighborhood, 1996 – Rock Island, IL  
Montecito/Happy Valley, 1996 – San Rafael, CA  
West Side Neighborhood, 1996 – Manchester, CT  
Verplanck Neighborhood, 1996 – Manchester, CT

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