

Let's Make 'Community' Central to Omaha's Community Development Work Russell L. Smith (4/16/2009)

The week of April 13, 2009 marked National Community Development Week. Each year, community development professionals and community members throughout the U.S. gather to recognize and celebrate achievements of the past year. Omaha recognized its 2009 community development stars with a recognition program and reception on Thursday, April 16th.

The idea of celebrating our community development achievements each year is important. It is equally important that we look back at what we have accomplished—and how we are approaching our community development work—before we move forward with a new year.

Looking back and looking forward seems particularly important today, given the economic and political changes sweeping our country. Locally, it is generally agreed that Omaha's next Mayor and City Council will face significant fiscal challenges. These challenges come at a time when Omaha is working hard to solve some BIG community and economic development challenges. The time is definitely ripe to reflect on how the City of Omaha approaches its community development work, and to consider new directions.

To frame this discussion, I want to ask a question, "Can we make 'community' central to Omaha's community development work?" If I were to re-state this to make it an exhortation, or even a tag-line, it would be, "let's make community central to Omaha!"

Answering this question requires answering a related question, "Why do we spend so little of Omaha's community development resources (and time) on nurturing and building community. The answer to this second question lies in how we conceptualize or define community development.

Many people define community development as *physical development*. This is understandable. After all, without physical development—or redevelopment—there would be no homes, apartments, stores, offices, streetscapes, infrastructure and public facilities for people to inhabit and use in their daily lives. The wonderful Ak-Sar-Ben Village and Midtown Crossing at Turner Park developments are extensive redevelopment projects that will have significant impact on Omaha. Clearly, this is important and should be supported by the community at some level.

Yet other people define community development as building up people, or as I like to call it, *people-building*. Central to this definition is the view of community as consisting of people living their lives in some common, or shared, way. When we focus on community development as people-building, we work to build and develop connections between people.

If we adopted this view of community development, our performance measures of success would be quite different. With community development as physical development, we focus on the design of a development, the number of housing code complaints that are resolved, or the number and square feet of newly constructed or rehabbed properties. By changing our view to stress people-building we require different measures such as the extent that community members interact with each other, spend time with one another, and reliance on one another to handle the challenges of every-day life.

I like to think of this “Let’s Make Community Central to Omaha” as building from the inside-out—we would work intensively with individuals to facilitate community building and development of the individual. This, in turn, would allow the individual to gain maximum benefit from physical development in Omaha.

What a contrast this is from community development as physical development. This more standard approach can be likened to building from the outside-in. Physical plans for specific geographic areas are developed; site assembly and conveyance is facilitated by the city; and subsidies are provided for construction and rehabilitation of properties. Once completed, we expect and hope that community residents will be able to take advantage of the intended benefits.

Let me be clear, I am NOT arguing that brick and mortar expenditures are misplaced. Rather, I am URGING that we place at least equal focus on developing from the inside-out. Let’s place people first!

To illustrate this alternative view of community development a bit more clearly, let me lift up several community-building efforts that are showing early signs of significant potential to build up people and improve our community’s development.

1. Orchard Hill Community Advocate. The Mammel Foundation’s Root 2 Fruit, Pick of the Crop fund is supporting a part-time advocate to help build community in the Orchard Hill Neighborhood. The goal is to make the neighborhood more sustainable by making homes healthier and more energy efficient. At the center of this initiative is fostering connections between residents, landlords, and property owners about neighborhood issues and needs, and placing social interaction on the same plane as physical development.

The project is funding a resident and former president of the neighborhood association. This person is supported, in turn, by a “community” of Omaha-area organizations working together as the Omaha Healthy Homes Partnership.

Already, the City of Omaha Planning Department has committed additional funds to increase the amount of time the advocate has to work with residents. What is most interesting is that all of this is taking place approximately 4 years after the City and other local agencies began a series of brick and mortar revitalization effort in Orchard Hill. Now we are working on building community. I would like to think that some day in the future the order of these activities might be reversed. First, begin building community and connections within the neighborhood, and then do bricks and mortar. Or, better yet, do both at the same time.

2. Neighbors United. Over the past year, Mosaic Community Development, a small, faith-based organization that focuses on outreach to low income and homeless persons—as well as community- and coalition-building—has been working with 15 different faith communities in the Park Avenue area. This group worked together over 6 months to identify food insecurity and building community among residents as the area’s primary needs. These needs stand in stark contrast to the priorities identified in a redevelopment plan crafted for the same area in 2007 and 2008. Not surprisingly, the redevelopment plan emphasizes physical development.

Since Sept. 2008, Mosaic Community Development has guided Neighbors United in offering a home-cooked meal program each Saturday at First Baptist Church. Thus far, over 150 volunteers have provided 4,370 meals during the first 7 months. An equal priority of the meal program is to have volunteers who are there to just talk, be a friend, and build relationships with guests from the neighborhood. Friendships are being forged, connections are being made, and hope is being restored for some of the guests.

These are just a few examples. More could be mentioned. But, the point is to illustrate that there are alternative ways of approaching community development in Omaha.

With this as background, it is appropriate to circle back to a slightly revised version of the original question. “What must be done to make community central to Omaha’s community development work?” I have two suggestions. Clearly, many more are needed.

First, based on a broader and more inclusive view of the community development process and what community means, we need to fund people-building initiatives at a far higher level than is now the practice in Omaha. We must have brick and mortar projects but we also need far more resources devoted to people-building. This will either require growing the size of the pie allocated for community development in Omaha, or reallocating current funds.

As for growing the size of Omaha’s community development pie, it is possible that increased funds available through the various federal “stimulus” measures could be used to initiate and test people-building strategies. It is also likely that Community Development Block Grant funds (CDBG)—the primary source of all dollars for community in Omaha—will increase during the coming years. Private, corporate, and individual philanthropy also needs to increase in this area.

Absent additional funds, there are still options for the City of Omaha to reinvent its approach to community development. Portland, Oregon has already taken this step. Starting in 2004, Portland began focusing its CDBG resources on helping people, not on helping improve specific geographic places or neighborhoods. Their goal is to raise the incomes of people assisted with CDBG funds by 25% within 3 years. A comprehensive approach is taken with each PERSON.

Omaha has a long way to go. Omaha’s 2008 CDBG funds were allocated almost totally to brick and mortar projects and necessary administrative costs. Only approximately 5 percent of \$6.2 million in CDBG funds went to what could be considered people-building efforts.

Second, Omaha needs to significantly increase the number and capacity of community-based nonprofit community development nonprofits. The Omaha Community Foundation called for just this action almost 10 years ago. Yet, despite the importance of these grass-roots organizations which carry out people-helping projects, Omaha has seen but scant growth in recent years.

A review of data provided by the National Center for Charitable Statistics shows that in December 2008, Omaha had a total of 29 nonprofit organizations working in the Community, Neighborhood Development, and Improvement (S20) domain. Of these, just 12 were large enough to be required to file IRS form 990 (\$25,000 in annual revenues). This number—12—is but a fraction of the nonprofit base found in communities such as Des Moines (24); Kansas City (47); Milwaukee (46); and Portland (36).

To close out, Omaha is on the precipice of accomplishing many great things. We are working and pulling together to confront significant issues such as poverty, high school drop-outs, college attendance rates, under- and unemployment, and homelessness. Community development work is vitally intertwined with these issues. Let’s achieve even more in the future by refocusing our definition of community development to place building up people first. Let’s Make Community Central to Omaha!