

Visionary Community Development Plan Earns Legacy Project

Written by Bill Taft on Jan 19, 2012

In summer 2007, thousands of Indianapolis residents turned out for an unprecedented opportunity: to create quality-of-life plans for their own neighborhoods. Six low-income communities had been selected to design plans for improving all aspects of neighborhood life, including education, housing, health, safety, and the arts. Among those neighborhoods selected was the Near Eastside, a community of 40,000 residents known for having one of the nation's highest home foreclosure rates.

A Quality Boost

The planning effort, called the Great Indy Neighborhoods Initiatives (GINI), had grown out of a citywide summit cosponsored by then-Mayor Bart Peterson, and a number of other community development leaders. The summit was intended to reenergize community development groups that had started up in the late 1980s, but seemed, 15 years later, to be operating without much direction or enthusiasm. The summit had proven to be a rousing success, and a diverse group of civic leaders joined with Indianapolis's Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) to launch GINI.

The quality-of-life plans for six neighborhoods—the Binford Area, Crooked Creek, the Near Westside, the Southeast Neighborhood, West Indianapolis, and the Near Eastside—were presented to Mayor Greg Ballard in April 2008. The plan was initially funded with \$2 million assembled by LISC, but partners have since leveraged \$170 million in additional investment. Participants report that the planning process forged unexpected partnerships and sparked new civic energy. Each month, hundreds of residents continue to attend task-force meetings to carry out their neighborhood plans.

GINI has also inspired the city to change its own approach to community development. Neighborhood planning efforts that used to involve only a handful of leaders now engage a wide range of residents, thanks to a process promoted through GINI for relationship building. More important, community development planners no longer dominate the meetings; the city now lets residents set the agenda.

In designing GINI, LISC and its partners drew on a new approach to community development already underway in places like Chicago and the South Bronx. LISC offices had traditionally focused on real-estate development as the vehicle for improving life in low-income neighborhoods. But that approach produced limited results and left many residents out of the agenda-setting process as well as the implementation of goals and projects for community development.

The new approach through GINI acknowledges that neighborhood transformation means improving not only the physical spaces, but also services, safety, employment, and human relationships. Furthermore, it seeks to engage as diverse a group of residents as possible. The GINI quality-of-life plans were devised during a series of community meetings held in churches, community centers, and school gymnasiums in each of the participating neighborhoods.

The GINI approach also requires a deeper commitment to each

community. Selecting only six neighborhoods for GINI may have been a politically unpopular move, but it was driven by a desire to achieve real change with limited resources instead of spreading those resources around to give each neighborhood a token amount of support. Concentrating limited resources allowed for more significant impact.

Before GINI, LISC community development efforts achieved anecdotal progress but not fundamental change in the dynamics of most neighborhoods. Now through GINI those dynamics are changing. In the Crooked Creek neighborhood, residents organized to win a \$500,000 federal grant to improve pedestrian safety at one of the city's most dangerous intersections. In the past, various groups had lobbied intermittently for the improvement with little success, but once it was stated as a priority in the quality-of-life plan, neighbors focused their political energy to make it happen. As a result, fired-up residents have turned out to zoning meetings like never before.

Across the city, GINI participants reported new civic participation in their neighborhoods. On the Near Westside, GINI brought together culturally diverse residents and neighborhood groups that had previously worked in isolation. Neighborhood associations that used to draw only a handful of senior citizens are now attracting youth, young parents, and new immigrants. Together they were able to accrue \$140,000 in crime prevention grants for street lighting and public safety events.

Near Eastside Wins Out

The GINI process showed its most powerful impact when the Near Eastside neighborhood became the focus of the most ambitious community development effort in local memory.

Once a thriving working-class community, the Near Eastside was devastated by the closing of two manufacturing plants in the 1980s and with it the loss of thousands of well-paying jobs. Ancillary businesses followed as two of the three nearby large shopping centers shut down. Homes were abandoned, and crime rose along with high school dropout rates. Still, the diverse neighborhood—about 60% white, 25% African American, and 15% Latino—retained its activist can-do spirit. Yet for many years, neighborhood groups lacked the resources to work together on any large-scale neighborhood improvement.

That changed with GINI.

In 2008, civic leaders decided that Indianapolis should make an attempt to attract Super Bowl XLVI, after losing the bid for the Super Bowl in 2011. They also created a Legacy component that would benefit the city long after the Big Game. Bid committee co-chair Mark Miles informally spread the word about this opportunity and was presented with ideas from a wide range of prominent nonprofit institutions.

LISC heard about the call for Legacy projects, and it sparked the idea of pitching the implementation of a quality-of-life plan as the Legacy Project. Miles responded positively to the initial concept,

which led to a close focus by bid committee leaders on the feasibility of such a venture. The proposed Super Bowl–neighborhood linkage could only work if there was a compelling neighborhood vision and capacity at the grassroots level to engage with a flood of new resources and partners.

All the neighborhoods that LISC had selected to create quality-of-life plans had strong neighborhood organizations able to draw hundreds of residents into the planning process, but the Near Eastside stood out above the rest. In June 2007, a total of 100 nonprofits and businesses, and 600 residents turned out for a series of small-group discussions held around tables in Arsenal Technical High School’s gymnasium.

The committee also viewed the Near Eastside plan as a model for neighborhood revitalization across Indianapolis. Miles thought if this initiative could be made successful by using the deadline and excitement of the Super Bowl, then perhaps it could become a template post-Super Bowl for people to rally around in other neighborhoods.

On May 20, 2008, NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell stepped out of the owners’ meeting to announce that Indianapolis had won its bid. He praised the city’s enthusiasm and highlighted the Near Eastside Legacy Project.

With the backing of the Super Bowl Host Committee, \$2 million in Legacy funds would go toward building a much-needed youth recreation center on the campus of Arsenal Tech High School. And that wasn’t all. The city’s Super Bowl Host Committee also agreed to help the neighborhood raise funds to repair, rehab, and build 250 to 300 homes in St. Clair Place, a blighted 32-square-block area in the heart of the Near Eastside. All homes receiving an intervention would meet high standards for energy efficiency, which would save low-income homeowners money. The city would replace curbs and sidewalks and build “green alleys” to drain rainwater.

Additional funds would go to redevelop a two-mile stretch of the neighborhood’s downtrodden commercial district on East 10th Street by upgrading façades and recruiting businesses to fill abandoned buildings. The city would add parking spaces, bike lanes, and more crosswalks to encourage pedestrian traffic. It also agreed to speed up the development of a walking trail that would intersect with East 10th Street.

To guide these projects and seek additional ways of supporting the implementation of the quality-of-life plan, a new Legacy Initiative Steering Committee was established. Civic leaders on the committee overseeing the Legacy Project agreed to co-chair each subcommittee with a neighborhood resident. Mark Miles and longtime resident Anne Marie Hanlon, now co-chair of the Legacy committee. This partnership has benefited both partners, with civic leaders receiving feedback on how effective their programs are, and neighborhood residents benefiting from the outside expertise and access to resource networks. The momentum for change within the community and the friendships that have sprung up between civic leaders and residents will outlast the Legacy Project, evidenced by the number of Legacy volunteers who have already been incorporated into standing committees and boards of community organizations.

The Super Bowl Legacy Project has already demonstrated the power of linking effective grassroots organizations with the power of civic leadership structures. While the \$100 million in investment obtained through Legacy partnerships is the first fruit of this powerful team, it points toward even greater opportunities ahead. Since most of these investments came from sources that have no direct affiliation with the Super Bowl, why not expand this approach of aligning broad civic resources behind a targeted grassroots vision to address many more urban neighborhoods? Actually, the opportunity for replicating this approach on a larger scale is already under discussion, and when the big game is over in 2012, Indianapolis will continue to build on its first victory on the Near Eastside.

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