

BUILDING GREAT NEIGHBORHOODS

A Citizens' Guide for Neighborhood Planning

by

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DEDICATION

This manual is dedicated to the members of the Leadership Team at South West Area Neighbors (SWAN), in Grand Rapids, Michigan, who tested this neighborhood planning process and gave so much of their time and talent to plan for their neighborhood's future:

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INTRODUCTION

During the last half of the 20th century, core cities in Michigan experienced the twin trends associated with urban sprawl - abandonment and disinvestment. As middle- and upper-income people fled to the suburbs, primarily low-income households were left in the central city. Neighborhood and business associations were organized to fight the deterioration, reduction in city services and the crime that followed. The 1990s brought new prosperity to some of our cities as young people and former suburbanites discovered the amenities of city living.

Cities in the process of revitalization are now faced with a new set of challenges: gentrification, a lack of tools to maintain housing that is affordable to a range of household incomes and valued neighborhood businesses squeezed by increasing property values. Cities still suffering from economic decline struggle to build a feeling of community. Residents and business owners in both of these kinds of neighborhood share a feeling of uncertainty about their future and that of their neighborhood.

The Manual

“Building Great Neighborhoods” outlines a neighborhood planning process that can assist residents, businesses and other neighborhood stakeholders in taking control of their future. It provides *one* potential approach to neighborhood revitalization. This manual explains how a neighborhood can develop a Vision for its redevelopment and construct an Action Plan to implement that Vision. Together, they form the basis of a Neighborhood Plan. The process described here is *empowering* because it requires current neighborhood stakeholders to take the lead in deciding how their area will be improved (shared vision). It is a *consensus-building* model because it builds upon common ground rather than defining and accentuating differences. This process also has a *capacity-building* component because the planning activities are coordinated through the neighborhood association or other community-based organizations, expanding stakeholders’ ability to handle increasingly complex projects.

Basic Components of a Neighborhood Plan:

1. Leadership Team – guides the planning process.
2. Neighborhood Profile and SWOT Analysis – determine where we are now.
3. Worst Case Scenario – shows where we do not want to go.
4. Visioning and Preferred Scenario – shows where we do want to go.
5. Neighborhood Survey and Neighborhood Summit – provide tools to build the plan.
6. Action Teams and Action Plan - achieve the Vision.



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Any community-based organization interested in planning for its neighborhood's future can use this manual. Each chapter explains a step in the process of developing a neighborhood improvement plan. This process has been proven effective in organizing a neighborhood to manage change. ***This process can be adapted to meet the specific conditions of your neighborhood.***

A Neighborhood Plan sets the course for the neighborhood's future. It provides the context from which to evaluate concepts and make policy decisions. For example, when downtown or a private developer proposes a project for a neighborhood, it will be measured against the Neighborhood Plan to see if it helps achieve the Vision. The plan also assists community-based organizations in planning their activities to complement and help achieve neighborhood goals. The plan should also function as a unifying mechanism bringing residents, businesses, and other neighborhood stakeholders together to work collaboratively on agreed upon goals and dreams. ***Focusing the attention of all sectors on the goals and strategies encompassed in the Neighborhood Plan increases the opportunities for significant neighborhood improvement.***

The planning process described in this manual is generally based on a planning project undertaken in Grand Rapids, Michigan, by the South West Area Neighbors (SWAN) in cooperation with Michigan State University. (Appendix M is an overview of the SWAN experience.) This process will have to be adapted to the unique character of each neighborhood and to the unique circumstances of each neighborhood association. ***This manual should be used as a guide and not as an end in itself.***

Neighborhood planning involves hard work, long hours, frustration and stress, but also passion, the art of compromise, and a valuable opportunity to learn about your neighbors, yourself and the community. Make the investment in building the future of your neighborhood – the dividends are tremendous. Just make sure that you take the time to enjoy the process. You must be able to look at your Neighborhood Plan when it is finished and feel good about the work that was done on this worthwhile project. So, two important words to remember: HAVE FUN!!!

“The strategic visioning process allows the community to stretch beyond what exists now to reach new potential for the future. Through collaboration and consensus building, diverse sectors are brought together to determine what they want the community to be in the future. People become empowered through their active participation in creating the community's future and thereby become more adept in dealing with change.”

**Dr. Janet Ayres
Purdue University**



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What is Neighborhood Planning?

For purposes of this manual, neighborhood planning is defined as a process initiated by a neighborhood association or other community-based organization that involves residents, business owners and other neighborhood stakeholders (churches, schools, etc.) in deciding what improvements they would like to see happen in their neighborhood. A Neighborhood Plan builds on the assets already in place so that the unique character and vitality of the area are preserved and enhanced.

In neighborhood planning, the process is just as important as the plan itself! Done in the format described, it empowers residents and other neighborhood stakeholders to both gain some control over their future and develop leadership skills. It is also a capacity-building process in that it increases the neighborhood association's ability to handle more complex issues and activities.

Neighborhood planning differs from the kind of planning done by professional planners in several ways. Most importantly, the physical design of place does not drive this planning process. **Finding out what residents and business owners want in the neighborhood and how the area should feel is what drives neighborhood planning.** How those things are accomplished through design and physical improvements largely becomes the role of the professional planner (form follows function).

Neighborhood-based planning should be resident-led, but it should involve all current stakeholders: businesses, faith-based organizations, schools, landlords, etc. To the extent possible, all people within a neighborhood should be involved in the planning process. Neighborhood planning must be an open process in which everyone's perspective is heard and respected. It is important that a consensus be gained among those currently in the neighborhood on how the area should be redeveloped. This widespread agreement on how the area should look in the future becomes the neighborhood's "shared vision." Consensus on the Vision is reached at a "neighborhood summit" – the culmination of the planning process. An "Action Plan" is then developed to achieve the shared vision.

Change is going to happen – of this we are certain. Will you just react to it?

Or will you decide to manage it?

Frequently Asked Questions

Why Neighborhood Planning?

Traditional planning has generally meant that City Hall or other outside parties impose their ideas of redevelopment onto the people who know the neighborhood best – the people who live and work there. Neighborhood-based planning is an alternative. It is a natural outgrowth of citizen-based initiatives, a hallmark of democratic governments. It takes citizen participation to the next level: citizen decision making. A Neighborhood Plan is a self-improvement plan.

Neighborhood associations have very limited resources but are bombarded with requests to get involved in myriad activities. How does a neighborhood group decide which of these activities to pursue? *A Neighborhood Plan becomes an effective measurement stick.* Does activity “X” help us achieve our Plan? Activity “X” could involve a very noble cause, but if it does not help achieve the neighborhood goals specified in the Neighborhood Plan, then it should not be pursued. It is extremely difficult for neighborhoods to say “no” to the many noble causes that pass their way. To be most effective, however, the resources of the neighborhood association must be focused on accomplishing the Neighborhood Plan.



Neighborhood associations also receive many requests to endorse or support various projects, zoning variances, etc. Again, the Neighborhood Plan becomes a yardstick to measure the appropriateness of these requests. Is the request compatible with the long-range Vision for the redevelopment of the neighborhood? Does the request help achieve the goals and strategies outlined in the Neighborhood Plan? If the request is not compatible or does not advance the plan, the answer is “no” (even if the request is being made by a really nice person!). *A Neighborhood Plan functions as a guide when making decisions and policies about the neighborhood.* A Neighborhood Plan consists of quality of life issues such as safety, good schools and a sense of community, as well as land uses.

Where’s The Action?

A plan does not mean much unless it is implemented. That is why an Action Plan is an integral part of the Neighborhood Plan. After the shared Vision is agreed upon, specific strategies and activities that will achieve the Vision are developed. This becomes the Action Plan. It is the neighborhood’s responsibility to make sure its Plan is implemented. The neighborhood must initiate action to realize its goals.

What About City Hall?

The city is an important partner in neighborhood planning. Although the city should not drive the process, your association needs a close working relationship that takes advantage of significant technical expertise along with funding resources that may be available through the city.

It is also important to make sure your Neighborhood Plan is compatible with your city's Master Plan. Be aware of the guidelines and standards the Master Plan has for your neighborhood. (See Chapter 9 for more information on this.) If you do not already have a good relationship with the city planning department, now is a good time to develop one. Call and ask about any planned activities for your neighborhood: street improvements, traffic calming measures, etc. Effective communication with the planning department can help alleviate potential problems and provide coordination for physical improvements in your area. Additionally, a partnership with the planning department can provide an opportunity for citizens to learn more about planning concepts so that they make more informed decisions.

How Much Will This Planning Cost?

Costs involved in this planning process can range from minimal to expensive. It depends on how you want to do it. Minimally, copying and postage expenditures will be incurred. Other expenses can include staff time, consultant, refreshments at meetings and research-related activities. Additional costs will be incurred at the Neighborhood Summit (food, facilitator, packet materials, flip chart, supplies, etc.).

The following chapters explain the specific steps involved in the neighborhood planning process. In the appendices, you will find some tools that may be used throughout the planning process. Please take a moment now to review the appendices so that you will know what is available.



LAND MINE: Although citizens are not professional planners, they know what they want and what they do not want in their neighborhood. Professional planners can assist citizens in making their dreams become a reality. The difference in respective roles must be understood and respected, and it must be reciprocal. It is imperative that neighborhood associations understand this distinction and then help professional planners understand it. Some professional planners are not used to working with citizen planners. Professional planners deal primarily with the land use parts of your Neighborhood Plan.

Resources/References

Green, "Asset Building and Community Development."

Jones, "Neighborhood Planning: A Guide for Citizens and Planners."

Martz, "Neighborhood-Based Planning: Five Case Studies."

