

**MEMORANDUM**

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**Date:** July 20, 2010**From:** Robert Thompson (NCR staff)**To:** NCEC Commissioners**Cc:** David Rubedor (Director, NCR)**Re:** Initial Findings from May-July 2010 Neighborhood Listening Sessions**Attachment:** Consolidated Notes v5. xls

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**SUMMARY**

During May, June and July, 2010, members of the City of Minneapolis' Neighborhood and Community Engagement Commission (NCEC) and staff from the City's Department of Neighborhood and Community Relations (NCR) attended more than 50 neighborhood meetings and held a series of 5 public meetings to gather ideas for a new funding program for Minneapolis neighborhood organizations. This report provides background on the process, and summarizes the findings on pages 4 to 7. Appendixes A to C provide background information on the engagement process, and Appendixes D to X show selected comments related to themes related to development of the new Community Participation Program.

**BACKGROUND**

On February 22, 2010, the NCEC organized a Committee of the Whole charged with the task of recommending a new program to fund recognized Minneapolis neighborhood associations, starting in 2011. This new Community Participation Program was identified in the Framework for the Future as a replacement for funding from the Minneapolis Neighborhood Revitalization Program (NRP) and Citizen Participation funding. Funding for neighborhood associations from the NRP is anticipated to decline over the next several years, while the current Citizen Participation funding will end after 2010.

Guided by the seven core [Principle's of Engagement](#) adopted by the Mayor and City Council on December 7, 2007 (see Appendix A), the Committee of the Whole, working with NCR staff, developed a stakeholder engagement plan, and recommended a two-cycle engagement process (see Appendix B). During the first cycle, NCR staff and NCEC Commissioners would gather input from Minneapolis neighborhood associations and other stakeholders prior to developing draft guidelines and a draft allocation policy for the Community Participation Program. This first cycle would occur over May and June, 2010. A second-cycle of engagement would provide neighborhood organizations and other stakeholders a 45-day review and comment period prior to developing final recommendations.

Following the recommendations of the Committee of the Whole, Minneapolis NCR staff and NCEC Commissioners attended meetings with most of the 72 officially recognized Minneapolis neighborhood associations, and organized five public meetings between late-April and mid-July, 2010, to gather input prior to developing draft allocation policy and guidelines for the new Community Participation Funding program. Organizations and individuals were also invited to provide written comments.

While comments gathered at these meetings covered a wide range of issues, this report summarizes comments regarding the policy for allocating funds to neighborhood organizations, and the goals and expectations of neighborhood associations for the new program.

Additional comments from participants also provide guidance and suggestions for the new NCR department, both in terms of administration of the Community Participation Program, administration of the department, and its relation to neighborhood associations. Participants also provided input on their activities and work, their relationship to the City of Minneapolis and NRP, and challenges they face.

The additional comments provide a rich set of data that can and should be mined for future reference.

## **METHODOLOGY**

NCR staff contacted neighborhood associations to request meetings, either during regularly scheduled board meetings, or during special meetings organized specifically for discussion of the Community Participation Program. While most neighborhoods invited NCR staff and Commissioners to attend their board meetings, two groups of neighborhoods requested combined neighborhood organization meetings, some opted to attend one or more of the five public meetings, and one neighborhood opted to provide comments in writing.

A set of five guiding questions was provided to participants of each meeting (see Appendix C: Guiding Questions), to help facilitate and focus the discussion on the allocation policy and Community Participation Program guideline decisions facing the commission and department. During these listening sessions, Commissioners and NCR staff would occasionally ask clarifying or following up questions as well. Comments were captured on flip charts by NCR staff, and transcribed within a day or two of the meeting. When requested, transcribed notes were sent to neighborhood associations for review and revision.

Comments (including written comments) were then consolidated into a single spreadsheet, including the source (neighborhood or public meeting, written comments).

In order to identify overall themes and messages, each comment was then categorized, and, where possible, subcategorized. Note that this categorization is somewhat subjective, and is based on the “best guess” of NCR staff of how the comment relates to other comments, and are not set in concrete. Staff focused particularly on comments regarding the allocation policy, goals and expectations of the program, and expectations about process. Other

comments about NCR services and administration, neighborhood activity and concerns, and about relations with the City and NCEC are also equally valid and important, and will be taken up in a subsequent report of findings.

### **Organization of Comments**

The comments are organized by source (neighborhood, public meeting, written comments); order of comments on flip charts; the comments themselves; guiding question (when available); general category (e.g. allocation policy, goals and expectations, etc); and subcategory (e.g. specific recommendations for allocation policy such as divide equally, baseline, needs based, etc.). The spreadsheet can be sorted or filtered using dropdown buttons in the heading row. The basic categories include:

- **Allocation policy:** Comments related to development of an allocation policy.
- **Challenges:** Comments about challenges currently faced by neighborhood associations.
- **City:** Comments about city services or programs.
- **Goals/expectations:** Comments related to participant's goals or expectations for the Community Participation Program.
- **NCR Administration:** Comments with suggestions or expressing concern about administration of the Department of Neighborhood and Community Relations.
- **Need to improve:** Comments expressing concern about neighborhood engagement or suggestions for improving engagement.
- **Neighborhood Activity:** Comments about current goals and activities of neighborhood organizations.
- **Neighborhood Characteristics:** Comments, which describe the overall work of the organization, or characteristics of the neighborhood.
- **NRP Lessons:** Comments about lessons learned from NRP.
- **Other:** Comments, which do not fit neatly with other categories.
- **Process:** Comments about the process of developing the Community Participation Program or administration.
- **Questions:** Questions raised about the NCR, NCEC, process or administration.
- **Services:** Suggested services to be provided by the City or NCR.

### **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS:**

#### **Frustration with Current Community Engagement System**

**Community Engagement:** Participants expressed anger and frustration over their experiences with the City's community engagement and communication practices, including the process of establishing the Department of Community Relations and the Neighborhood and Community Engagement Commission. Comments addressed participants' concerns that their input was not valued by the City, and was regularly disregarded. Participants identified specific areas of concern (such as lack of communication) encouraged the city to value neighborhood organizations as partners, respect their process (such as providing greater time for responding to

City requests for input), and suggested areas for improvement (such as higher visibility of neighborhood organizations on the City’s website). See “Appendix D: Frustration with Current Community Engagement.”

**Loss of Resources:** There was significant concern by participants that the current estimate of \$3,000,000 for funding of neighborhood organization activity was not sufficient, and that NCR and the City should seek additional resources for funding neighborhood organizations. Suggestions included Community Development Block Grants (CDBG), other state or federal funds, foundations (with the possibility of NCR re-granting foundation funds), and payment to neighborhood organizations for City required services. See “Appendix E: Comments regarding Other Resources.”

**Overburdened Volunteers:** Participants noted frequently that the City did not value neighborhood organization volunteers as an important resource, and warned the current system of engagement (and the administrative burden of NRP and Citizen Participation contracts) would lead to burnout of volunteer leaders. Many expressed frustration that the administrative burdens distracted them from focusing on neighborhood and organization priorities. See “Appendix F: Overburdened Volunteers.”

### **Goals and Expectations:**

**Organizational Capacity and Autonomy:** An over-riding theme at many meetings was the importance of maintaining their organization’s capacity and autonomy, and retaining support of their staff and offices. Other participants noted that while their organizations may not currently have staff, having the capacity to add staff in the future was important. Others added that organizations choosing to not hire staff should not be negatively impacted. Many organizations also noted the importance of maintaining neighborhood organization autonomy and discretion over use of funds. See “Appendix G: Comments regarding Organizational Capacity.”

**Accountability:** While expressing their desire to maintain autonomy and discretion over use of funds, participants also identified accountability and transparency as an important value, noting that there should be some regular reporting of outcomes for funds received. At the same time, providing guidance regarding expectations and standards will help achieve accountability. See “Appendix H: Comments regarding Accountability.”

**Flexibility and Simplification:** Participants also expressed a preference for simplicity and flexibility, noting that past NRP processes and requirements were often rigid or overly bureaucratic. Participants also raised concerns that funding would include mandates (such as with the NRP Phase II requirement that 70% of funds be used for housing). Comments indicated that participants would prefer the ability to direct funding to administration, programs, planning purposes, or specific projects, and that there be some flexibility to allow organizations to respond to

changing conditions in the neighborhood, crises, or opportunities. See “Appendix I: Comments regarding Flexibility and Simplification.”

**Engagement and Empowerment:** Participants also commented on the importance of using Community Participation Program funds to assist with empowerment and engagement, including maintaining or creating media for communicating with their neighborhoods through newsletters, web sites, email, and other media tools. The ability to engage and work with diverse communities, including new American communities was also valued. Community building with festivals and other events was also commented on. See “Appendix J: Comments regarding Engagement and Empowerment.”

**Collaboration and Partnerships:** Comments were also directed towards the importance of neighborhoods collaborating with one another and partnering with other organizations. Those commenting on this aspect generally expressed that funding should encourage collaboration on the one hand, but should not be a requirement of funding. See “Appendix K: Comments regarding Collaboration and Partnerships.”

**Networking, Training and Information sharing:** Many participants expressed desire for more opportunities for networking, training, and information sharing with other organizations. Such networking could occur on regional or city-wide levels, as necessary. A large number of additional comments collected in the spreadsheet, but not necessarily summarized in this report, suggest a number of activities and characteristics common to neighborhood organizations, where information, practices, ideas and resources could be usefully shared. See Appendix L: “Comments regarding Networking, Training and Information Sharing.”

**Eligibility:** Some participants stated that eligibility should be limited to currently recognized neighborhood organizations, although a few suggested that funding could be open to other organizations. See “Appendix M: Comments regarding Eligibility.”

**Continued and Expanded Administrative Services and Group Purchasing:** Many participants identified group purchasing of services by NRP (such as Directors and Officers and General Liability insurance, auditing, legal filing, etc) as highly beneficial to their organizations, and encouraged continuation of those services through NCR as highly desirable. Participants suggested that the new department explore additional avenues for reducing administrative burdens and costs for neighborhood organizations (benefits for staff, grant writing, accounting, etc). See “Appendix N: Continued and Expanded Services and Group Purchasing.”

### **Allocation policy:**

Participants offered a number of suggestions for allocation of funding to neighborhoods. General suggestions for allocation of funds include dividing funds equally among neighborhoods or organizations; a needs-based allocation policy; competitive grants; and

providing some guaranteed base amount of funding for each neighborhood, with some additional allocation method on top of the baseline. Participants also were concerned about the timing of grants, and the relation to NRP funding.

**Divide Equally:** Some participants suggested dividing funds equally, either between neighborhoods or between neighborhood organizations, providing an average annual base of either \$37,000 per *neighborhood* or \$41,000 per *organization*. The difference between an allocation by neighborhood or by organization is significant: since some organizations represent more than one neighborhood, the distinction might represent a potential difference of between \$41,000 and \$148,000 for a single organization. Some participants expressed opposition to dividing funds equally. Concerns were raised that dividing simply by organization (rather than by neighborhood) would punish neighborhoods that chose to join together under a single organization for greater efficiency. See Appendix O: Comments regarding dividing funds equally among neighborhoods.

**Needs based:** A much greater number of participants suggested a needs-based formula for allocating funds, with many referencing the NRP allocation policy as an example. Elements defining “need” identified by participants included demographic factors (diversity of neighborhoods, need for translation, renters, age, income, etc); housing condition, foreclosures, vacant units, and absentee property owners; density and geographic size; past successes and efficiencies; and institutional impacts and facilities related impacts (proximity of University of Minnesota, parks, traffic). See “Appendix P: Comments regarding needs based allocation.”

**Competitive grants:** Several comments were directed to variations of competitive grants, either program based or performance based. Many participants expressed concern that competitive grants would pit neighborhoods against each other, and discourage collaboration. See “Appendix Q: Comments regarding Competitive Grants.”

**Baseline Plus:** Several participants suggested a baseline funding mechanism, guaranteeing each neighborhood a basic level of support, with some process to allocate additional funds above the baseline. Each organization would receive a base level of funding that might be divided by neighborhood or organization, or by population or number of households. Additional factors could include a needs-based, performance based, or project based components. See “Appendix R: Comments regarding ‘Baseline Plus’”

**Timing:** Many participants expressed concern about the time period of the allocation and of grants. Questions such as “would the allocation be for a single year, multiple years, or the full ten-year period” were raised by some. Participants were particularly concerned about the impacts on budgeting, cash flow and planning, and noted that the current environment of uncertainty of future funding created a chaotic environment for planning. Many participants suggested a multi-year

allocation and granting process to provide a greater level of certainty and stability for neighborhood organizations. See “Appendix S: Comments regarding Timing.”

**Independence from NRP status:** Participants identified their neighborhoods as being in various stages of implementing NRP Phase I plans, planning for Phase II, implementing Phase II plans, or having nearly exhausted Phase II funds. While some comments indicated that Community Participation Program funds should be tied to NRP status, more indicated that they should not be connected. See “Appendix T: Comments regarding Independence from NRP Status.”

**Leveraging resources:** Some participants commented on the success of their neighborhoods in using NRP funds to leverage additional funding and resources, and that this should be encouraged with the Community Participation Program. See “Appendix U: Comments regarding Leveraging of Resources.”

### **Process:**

**Communication and feedback:** Participants also noted the need for the NCR and NCEC to communicate with neighborhoods during the process of developing the Community Participation Program and other future funding programs, and particularly to let them know how input and feedback were used in decision-making process. See “Appendix V: Comments regarding Communication and Feedback.”

**Implementation and transition:** Participants expressed concerns over the implementation of the Community Participation Program, and the transition from NRP to NCR. Comments indicated that the implementation and transition should be as smooth and seamless as possible. See “Appendix W: Comments regarding Implementation and Transition.”