

Block Makeovers: An Exciting and Effective Strategy for Revitalizing Middle Neighborhoods

Community Action Partnership of North Alabama (Cullman AL)
Chattanooga Neighborhood Enterprise (Chattanooga TN)
Invest DSM (Des Moines IA)

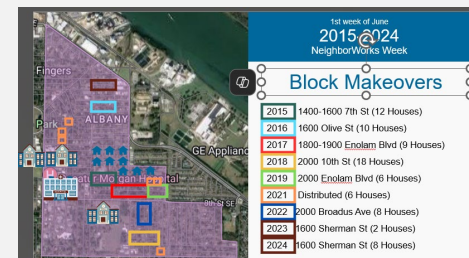
Maximum visible impact, community engagement and leadership, and momentum for neighborhood improvement are the goals behind “the Block Makeover,” a time-honored and popular strategy in middle neighborhoods. Block Makeovers typically layer multiple revitalization strategies on the same block or street, including beautification, resident leadership support, and the renovation of multiple homes simultaneously.

By improving the overall aesthetics and curb appeal of each participating property, property owners – and their neighbors – often see a boost in their home’s market value. Just as important is the dramatic demonstration of what is possible when residents coordinate their talents with the investment of a partner organization. Below are three examples of strong and successful block makeover programs, plus a comprehensive list of tips and how-tos.

Community Action Partnership of North Alabama (CAPNA)

About 10 years ago, in Decatur, Alabama, a town of about 50,000 people, CAPNA identified its plan for implementing block projects. The 100-block area has three schools, a hospital, and a medical district, and housing conditions were mixed, with some areas suffering from blight and vacancies. The area has numerous households with disabilities and a mix of owners and renters, and the intention was to improve curb appeal while building community partners and providing support for neighborhood revitalization.

CAPNA Block Makeover Map



CAPNA Example



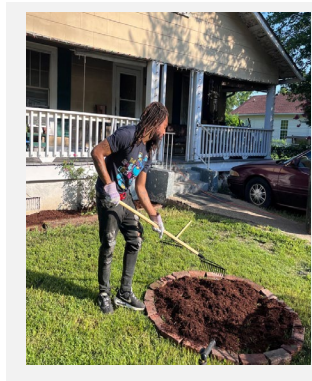
CAPNA’s program coincides with NeighborWorks Week and is free for participants. The work varies, depending on the overall block trends and individual homeowner goals. Projects include general cleanup and maintenance tasks, porch painting, pressure washing homes and garages, patching and painting foundations, trimming trees and stump grinding, building an outside seating area, installing or fixing a fence, repairing a driveway, and so on. CAPNA’s

program objectives vary yearly, depending on the community's needs. What remains the same are the lessons learned and overall methodologies.

Chattanooga Neighborhood Enterprise (CNE)

For over 40 years, CNE’s mission has been to create economically diverse neighborhoods filled with financially empowered citizens and housing for all. The agency hosts a variety of community-building and engagement activities to help create leaders in the community and build upon the pride, ownership, and capacity of neighbors to maintain the neighborhood overall. The types of curb appeal projects vary, but they all must meet the following specific requirements: projects must enhance the neighborhood aesthetic, maintain or improve the visual community, create an inviting location or environment, and foster community pride. Projects may include four or five homes or may involve an entire neighborhood. Some specific projects are highlighted below:

Can I get your number? CNE conducted this project in a neighborhood where emergency vehicles were having trouble finding homes during an emergency. The local library provided a vinyl printing press, and neighborhood leaders taught residents how to make the vinyl decals. Through this program, over 200 houses in the neighborhood received new house numbers, plus volunteer teams installed new mailboxes when needed.



Mission Mulch: Every fall and spring, CNE receives a large donation of mulch from the city of Chattanooga and donations from local businesses. The truckload of mulch is dumped at one location, and CNE delivers it to yards throughout the neighborhood. Landscapers who live in the neighborhood help teach residents how to build and maintain a small flower bed and which flowers and trees are appropriate for the neighborhood. That educational component increases the likelihood that gardens will be cared for long term.

Rock Your Porch: Porches experience considerable wear-and-tear and can easily become cluttered with debris. By offering to refresh and repair porches, CNE finds the results are two-fold – important work is completed to maintain the integrity of the structure, and clutter is removed to get the work done. Carpenters teach participants what type of paint or stain to use, how to sand a deck, how to remove old paint, and so on. Again, the educational component increases the likelihood that success will be long-lasting.



Invest DSM (Des Moines IA)

Like many cities, the housing stock in Des Moines is older and needs updates and repairs. The block makeover program helps address issues common with older homes and increase curb appeal through quick-win projects. Projects focus on home exteriors, but one explicit goal of the programs is to connect neighbors and improve social capital in the target area. Invest DSM has a fairly sizable budget each year; during the program's first four years, they completed 574 projects across four neighborhoods, with just over \$2.5 million in total investment.

Applications to participate run from April through August, and those with approved projects have 90 days to complete the

Example



Example



work. Projects must be visible from the street, and participants must apply as a team of neighbors; the more neighbors involved, the more generous the incentives for each participant. Team members must be geographically close to one another - they must be able to see each other from their front door – but can do their own projects and have their own scope of work. Invest DSM offers a dollar-for-dollar match for each participant up to a maximum amount.

Participants can use the money for any priority that matches the criteria. Examples include front door replacements, new storm doors, new house numbers or a mailbox, exterior paint, new windows, front step replacement, landscaping, or dead tree removal (if any tree is removed, it is replaced with a tree to protect the canopy). Project costs range from \$50 to \$5000. The incentive match cap is \$2,500, and the matching program is open to any household in the neighborhood. Lower-income households generally receive a greater match, about 75% of the project cost.

Program Steps

1. Team organizes
2. Meet with staff
3. Submit scope of work, take photos
4. Staff approve projects
5. Participants have 90 days to complete project
6. Team submits results with list of expenses and photos
7. Invest DSM cuts the check
8. Celebrate!

Evaluating Impact – Key Learnings and Insights

Over the years, block makeover programs have gained valuable insights. Program priorities include community engagement efforts, finding funding, building partnerships, building neighborhood leaders, and sound marketing. Any organization looking to build a similar program can benefit from learning the common challenges and lessons learned, outlined below.

Program Advantages

Demonstrable Change. Block makeovers create maximum visible change all at once and help homeowners feel proud of their homes and blocks. They also demonstrate to the rest of the neighborhood what is possible and inspire others to do similar projects.

One Thing Leads to Another. The creative process and participating in hands-on projects can be a great catalyst for new ideas. As one task is completed, a client may casually mention another possibility (*hey, what about this?*), and just like that, a new project is born.

Neighbors Get to Know Each Other. Block Makeovers build relationships, inspire neighborhood connectivity, and create new opportunities for collaboration. New relationships lead to celebrations, block parties, new groups on social media, and improved communication overall. For one block, a Halloween decorating tradition grew out of a Block Makeover event.

Increasing Home Value. Improvements to a home can positively affect curb appeal, which drives perception, ultimately drives demand, and increases property values overall.

New or Improved Leadership Skills. Volunteers and participants learn how to organize on behalf of the neighborhood during these events. These events oftentimes motivate people to get involved in other ways and engage at a higher level.

New or Improved Home Maintenance Skills. Block Makeovers help volunteers and participants build new skills like how to use a pressure washer, stain wood, patch foundations, etc. - which builds confidence.

Connections with Contractors. Conversations about contractors inevitably arise during the event, leading to referrals and even the creation of contractor lists. Additionally, group or neighborhood projects can attract contractors; they offer the potential for multiple projects in close proximity to each other, increasing efficiency and business opportunity.

Connections with Funders. Potential funders include local government, lenders, and philanthropic groups. These types of projects are generally attractive to funders because of the visible impact and relatively low cost. Moreover, partners often engage a work team to participate, which can build cohesion within their company.

Connections with Government Entities. This type of project creates opportunities for neighbors to meet local government leaders and build those relationships as well.

It's Fun! Though it takes a lot of work and planning, block makeovers are worth it. Both volunteers and participants generally enjoy the experience.

Common Challenges

Participant Permission: Obtaining participant permission can be time-consuming. Homeowners may fear it's a scam or be concerned that participating will be difficult. Staff may need to make multiple outreach attempts and leave fliers, make phone calls, and host informative meetings.

Complex Projects: Sometimes, the scope of repairs is greater than the organization can handle. Staff and participants alike must have realistic expectations and only take on tasks that can be completed.

Challenging Residents: Volunteer teams may encounter challenging behaviors that can impact their work. Ensure staff support is available to address these situations and that volunteers know how to reach them.

Important Lessons

Provide Training and Skill Building Opportunities. These events allow volunteers and participants to learn DIY skills and acquire new resources. Thoughtful educational strategies can include insight into the root causes of neighborhood disinvestment and ways to increase community engagement and positive relationships.

Create Impactful Messaging. Effective messaging is crucial to success. Overall, the concept of 'protecting your legacy' strongly resonates with homeowners; people generally want to build assets and create generational wealth.

Include Renters and Landlords. Renters also take pride in their properties and should be included in outreach. Landlords must be consulted if the project involves significant alterations, and staff must obtain necessary permissions. Block makeovers benefit landlords, too, and can foster valuable connections. Develop a basic agreement for landlords to sign and help facilitate communications between the landlord and the tenant.

Allow Failure. If an aspect of a project fails, it fosters growth and leadership. The greater impact is that hundreds of neighbors were trained to improve their homes and have ideas on maintaining their neighborhoods.

Take the Time to Plan. Project planning is the most time-consuming phase of these projects, often taking many months. The actual execution of the project itself can usually be done within a weekend.

Take Pictures. Take photos and invite neighbors to do a short video in front of their homes. Many will proudly share their work and sense of accomplishment.

Consider Dollar Amounts. A minimum project budget of about \$2,500 or less is typically relatively easy to secure through donations or small grants (though local funds are more flexible than federal or state funding). Funders often prioritize projects with significant impact while operating on a smaller budget. Also, this type of work can usually flex to meet the available budget.

Know Your Audience. Consider seasonal factors and other influences. Summer heat and winter cold can impact project feasibility. Weekends are typically reserved for family time. Careful timing is crucial for project success.

Invite Families. Given busy schedules and the importance of family time, these projects can be a wonderful opportunity for families and friends to come together, contribute to the greater good, and learn something new while supporting positive change.

Have a Backup Plan. Unforeseen circumstances come up, such as rain, storms, or water main breaks. Always have a backup plan or 'rain date' ready. Anticipate potential obstacles and be prepared to adapt. If a block event features a particular house for substantial renovation, it's also wise to have a backup house in case of unforeseen issues with the first property, such as homeowner dissatisfaction with the paint or stain color.

Provide Restrooms and Parking. Consider partnering with a school or church to provide parking and convenient restroom access. If necessary, supplement with portable toilets.

Identify Referrals. Challenges, such as needing larger home improvements or legal/ownership questions, may arise. To help households address these issues, establish a referral system to connect them with appropriate resources. Include referrals to entities that can provide solutions, such as home rehab programs and local legal aid offices.

Building a Block Makeover

Below are some important steps to consider when developing your methodology:

Decide on the Scale of the Project. In Des Moines, Block Makeovers are mostly organized and implemented completely by residents and any contractors they hire themselves, with grant funds to help cover the costs. In Decatur, a lot of the work is done by volunteer teams managed by CAPNA, with residents where possible, completing basic improvements like painting, landscaping, and other cleanup. In Chattanooga, residents do most of the work with modest financial support. In Syracuse, Home Headquarters hosts a "Block Blitz" program that can involve several moderate to substantial home repair projects funded by low-interest loans and grants, plus resident and volunteer-led beautification and minor repairs.

Formulate A Plan: Consider: Where will funds come from? How much is needed? What is the budget for the program? Who are potential community partners that can help? Are any volunteers needed?

Build Sound Marketing: Create a robust marketing plan. Paper fliers are still effective! Canvass the neighborhood and knock on doors. Send postcards to 'save the date' and include all residents. Create events on social media and share posts to advertise the event. Hang a banner in town to get people excited. Promote food and celebration, sell (or give away) t-shirts, and take group photos. Good marketing techniques and photos can be used over and over, year after year.

Find Areas to Target: Leverage the city's GIS system to assess occupancy within the target area. Determine the proportion of owner-occupied and rental properties – this data will inform your decision on whether to focus on one or both property types.

Take Before and After Photos: Before the event, take photos of the project site to document the initial condition. Capture these images at least one week in advance and label them clearly. During the event, assign a volunteer to take photos throughout the day, including shots of each completed project. Capture images of staff, neighborhood leaders, and corporate teams participating. If the property owner consents, take photos of them at the project's conclusion to add a human element to the story.

Create Waivers / Get Signatures: If someone other than the owners of a particular property are doing work on it, the owner must provide written consent for the work to be performed on their property. Waivers should grant permission for the project and release the organization from liability. Clearly communicate that volunteers are not professionals and that the project, while aiming for improvement, may not yield professional-level results. Emphasize that volunteers receive training and that the project will enhance the property's appearance.

Determine Scope/s of Work: Assess the necessary scope of repairs for each home and determine the level of expertise required from any volunteers who may be helping. Focus on projects that are suitable for volunteer skill sets, such as minor repairs, and avoid undertaking major tasks like window replacement or roof repairs without professional contractors. Recognize that a coat of paint cannot address underlying structural or functional issues.

Maximize Owner Involvement: Collaborate closely with homeowners throughout project planning. If volunteers or contractors will be doing work on their home, discuss needs and preferences, and be sure to allow them to select paint colors or landscaping materials. The goal is to create change that aligns with their vision, so they are committed to maintaining it long-term.

Create a Staging Area: Establish a central staging area for volunteers. Include a large canopy tent with tables to store essential supplies such as snacks, sunscreen, drinks, and tools. Choose a location with ample parking, especially if many volunteers are expected.

List of Tools and Supplies: Compile a complete list of tools and supplies for the event. This means carefully reviewing each project and creating a detailed list of necessary materials for each property. Remember to include essential tools such as electric saws and pressure washers. Since these tools may not be required for every project, renting them may be the most cost-effective.

Plan Waste Removal: Rent a dumpster of appropriate size to accommodate construction debris and other waste generated during the project. Coordinate with the city or town to schedule a designated trash pickup after the event. Recycle whenever possible.

Invite the Fire Department and Police Force: Invite the Fire Department and Police Department to participate. They may be willing to assist with more complex tasks, such as the demolition of hazardous structures. The Waste Department is also a valuable partner and may be able to provide dumpsters for waste disposal and potentially a dedicated cleanup crew. Furthermore, collaborate with utility companies to address potential safety hazards, such as trimming branches around power lines.

Get Local Business Involved: Engaging local businesses can significantly increase volunteer morale. For example, a local food service company could demonstrate its commitment by sending out a branded vehicle stocked with beverages and snacks. This visible show of support can boost enthusiasm and create a positive atmosphere during the project.

Keep the Process Simple. Streamline the registration and participation process to ensure it is easy for individuals to get involved. Minimize potential barriers to entry, making participation as convenient and welcoming as possible.

Be Flexible. Flexibility is key throughout the project. Be prepared for sudden adjustments to the timeline, unforeseen circumstances, and the need to adapt plans as necessary.

Create Yard Signs. Yard signs help spread awareness of the project and foster a sense of neighborhood cohesion and pride for participants. Design the signs to be visually appealing and include instructions on how to join the initiative.

Know Your Audience. Develop a clear and concise plan that outlines project goals and implementation strategies. Ensure the project aligns with the identified needs and priorities of the residents. Conduct demographic research and cultivate cultural competency to tailor the program effectively to the specific needs and preferences of the target population.

Track Success. Develop a way to track success, which includes project descriptions, number of households participating, volunteer groups and hours, etc. Show the dividends and impact overall; these results can be used in many ways down the road.

Plan for Work Complaints. Conduct thorough pre-work to identify potential issues proactively. Develop a clear process for addressing complaints. This includes identifying the source of the issue, understanding the residents' expectations, analyzing the actual results, and determining appropriate corrective actions. Involve residents in the planning and execution of the project to not only minimize the likelihood of complaints but also foster a sense of ownership and shared responsibility.

Respect Limits. Avoid deploying volunteers to complex tasks requiring specialized expertise, such as electrical work, plumbing, or heavy equipment. Furthermore, projects that would necessitate obtaining building or construction permits should be implemented by professionals unless you have the capacity to manage them closely.

Have Specs Available. Develop and readily share building resources with residents who may be planning work themselves or need a plan to shop for contractors. For projects like decks or ramps, provide a selection of pre-designed specifications and blueprints featuring basic, well-proven designs. Include cost breakdowns and step-by-step guides for project completion. Make this information publicly accessible through a dedicated webpage, including how-to guides, best practices, work lists, project expectations, and other relevant resources.

Questions?

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Invest DSM

Invest DSM Tracking Success Diagram

