

Building Neighborhood Capacity with Public Support

City of Oklahoma City, Planning Department
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

The City of Oklahoma City has been operating its neighborhood planning and capacity building program for over nine years. The program, called Strong Neighborhoods Initiative, requires a five-year partnership between neighborhood associations and the planning department. Neighborhoods are invited to participate based on a selection process that involves multiple socioeconomic data points like income-qualifying census tracts, infrastructure, proximity to services, property values, schools, vacancy, homeownership, crime, and ethnicity, plus circumstances such as lack of investment or noticeable changes over time. Once information is gathered, the planning department creates a hot-spot map and determines if formal or informal neighborhood associations exist in those areas.

Prospective neighborhoods are invited to apply to the SNI and resident leaders fill out the three-page application. Applications are then reviewed by a selection committee and undergo an interview process, and then three neighborhoods are recommended to city council to join the five-year program. The group of resident participants may be informal – the neighborhood does not need to have a formal association – but should include committed individuals and active volunteers. The City and local non-profit partner, Neighborhood Alliance, help residents build capacity, set goals, plan events, create and distribute fliers, connect with local partners, and advertise on social media.

Building a good neighborhood improvement plan and capacity for a successful neighborhood association means partnering with existing neighborhood groups, schools, libraries, and businesses. It means celebrating their uniqueness, their cultures and identifying existing strengths and applying sound, equitable strategies to support what already exists. It is important to take the time to identify assets and identify ways that the broader community can support those assets. In Oklahoma City, the city government provides resources to the SNI areas, plus tools and workshops so they can become self-sustaining. They teach strategies for building neighborhood alliances and help them identify gaps and solutions. The key is to empower, educate and support existing residents, so they know how to resolve issues on their own. Also, be sure to celebrate success.

Funding the Program. Once an application is accepted to the SNI, the three neighborhood groups work with staff to develop revitalization strategies in four categories: housing, infrastructure, economic development, and community services. Most of the dozen or so programs that are used to implement the strategies are funded by the city's allocation of Community Development Block Grant and HOME programs from HUD. Staff seeks local partners to address others, while the neighborhoods are also encouraged to fundraise for smaller projects and events. The city's goal is a 3:1 ratio for private versus public implementation funding in each area of the plan. Building permits are one way the city measures this ratio.



Choosing a Focus. An important part of the City’s role as facilitator is to help neighborhoods prioritize an area of focus that they themselves can take a lead role in implementing with partners. One group may decide to focus on homeownership or on supporting local food sources, and another may want to focus on addressing property conditions in the neighborhood, landlord issues, fair housing, or code enforcement. The key is to help residents determine the needs of the neighborhood, and create a solid, workable solution that matches their and their partners’ capacity. Project ideas are endless but the critical role that local government plays is to provide support and information so residents can facilitate improvements themselves. “It is best if residents set the goals and the City helps with the strategy,” says Entz, “but they may also need solid partners and funding.”

Creative Ideas. Some of the most successful ideas are the most unusual. In OKC, residents from all three SNI areas shared that they didn’t feel safe being outdoors because of stray animals. Neighbors and the city worked together to create partnerships to offer free pet vaccinations, as well as opportunities for spaying or neutering pets. This turned out to be an important service to offer; trips to the vet can be expensive and sometimes there are no nearby options. More than 400 people and pets attended and shared very positive feedback. Local animal control used this as an opportunity to educate owners about proper care and provide resources if needed. Pets are part of the family and have a big impact on resident health. If possible, find additional partners who can bring leashes and food donations for those in need.



Focus on actions or activities that are desired by the community. Encourage residents to think about unique traits or priority needs in the area and build upon those traits. For example, places with extreme weather may benefit from storm preparation activities. Like many cities, Oklahoma City has extreme weather and large, aging, hazardous trees – which are a threat to the health and safety of others in the community and are expensive to resolve – so the SNI staff contracted with a certified arborist Davey Tree Service to trim or remove them at no cost to low-income neighbors within the SNI boundaries. Talk with neighbors and take a look at what’s needed and build on that. Also, consider what other neighborhood groups are doing and share ideas and solutions.

Tips for Success

Build Partnerships	Identify issues, then find partners who can help address those issues.
Be Transparent with Spending	Keep meticulous records and use that information to help others develop a budget.
Create a Simple Sign-up Process	Create an application and process that is straightforward and simple, so the inspiration comes from neighborhood residents, not you. Create an outline that identifies results and let the group take it from there. Provide support and foster connections.
Meet in the Neighborhood	Meet in the neighborhood such as at a local school, front yards, or church, rather than city hall. Work alongside existing neighborhood associations and focus on capacity building and empowerment.
Help Build Partnerships	Create a list of neighborhood resources that residents can turn to.
Employ Experienced Project Managers	Hire someone who knows how to work with people, and who is skilled at public speaking and building connections. Find someone who is resourceful and knows how to assemble and share information.
Support Equity	Focus on equity, be a good listener, address bias, and determine a process for addressing bias when it arises. Provide support and a strategy to address inequities.
Be Visible	Promote good work and find ways to celebrate. Install street sign toppers, conduct landscaping, build benches, plant trees, and offer activities to get the community involved. Support beautification projects that are visible as people drive by. Create a logo, build a brand, and start a social media campaign. Also, don't forget more traditional methods of marketing such as mailers, radio ads, and television.
Acknowledge Failure	If a group tries something that does not work, focus on what was learned and ways to improve the process. Troubleshoot, brainstorm solutions, and build new policies and procedures. If issues are not solvable, acknowledge that and walk away if needed.
Focus on Connectivity	Building sidewalks, addressing ADA compliance, and finding ways to connect people with jobs, schools and healthy outcomes is critical to building neighborhoods. Regardless of the project, always have the concept of improving connectivity going in the background.
Focus on the Neighborhood	Incorporate specific approaches related to interests within the neighborhood. If the area has a specific artistic or historical interest, build upon that. One neighborhood in Oklahoma City wanted to build a monarch butterfly sanctuary so they secured funding, planted specific trees and plants, and built gardens to attract butterflies. Every neighborhood is unique so take the time to help residents identify – or create – an identity from which to build their plan.

Questions?

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