

## **Memorandum**

To: Policy Board Members and Alternates

From: Robert D. Miller, Director

Date: February 23, 2009

Subject: Proposed Networking Initiative

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Over the years, NRP has been contacted and visited by government and neighborhood program officials from all regions of the U.S. as well as a number of foreign countries wanting to know more about NRP's planning processes, levels of participation, results achieved and funding mechanisms. Too often, however, we've come away from such exchanges wishing there was more ability to follow-up with each other and more people (particularly neighborhood staff and volunteers) who could participate in and benefit from, these exchanges of information and discussions.

In the past few years, our efforts to establish relationships with other city programs, staff and volunteers have included: attending Neighborhoods USA conferences, joining participants from Des Moines, Omaha, Wichita, and Kansas City in regional conferences sponsored by Bank of the West, participating in the City Showcase at the National League of Cities, and presenting at international conferences sponsored by Harvard University and the University of Toronto. These have all been great opportunities to connect with our counterparts around the country and throughout the world and learn about all the things other neighborhood and community groups are doing.

Last year we surveyed neighborhood program officials across the country to find out more about the range of city programs they manage, the kinds of issues they face, and the level of interest they have in expanding their communications with colleagues. We learned that neighborhood programs, staff and volunteers want to communicate with their peers, have a genuine interest in learning about what others are doing, and already participate in a number of forums and associations that help people make these connections.

We also learned, however, that most of the survey respondents felt that current efforts were simply not enough. There is a real need for opportunities to regularly and meaningfully exchange ideas and information.

In recent conversations with colleagues on the Neighborhoods USA Board, I have discussed the idea of developing some web tools to foster more avenues of communication with neighborhood programs and neighborhood organizations across the country.

With budgets tight and travel costs prohibitive for many organizations, it seems more critical than ever to explore cost effective, energy efficient alternatives to help neighborhood activists and local government officials connect with each other and share information. Web technologies to create an internet hub for neighborhoods might include features such as:

- Topical blogs - developed and managed by specialists in each area
- A monthly email digest highlighting: news items, blog topics, updates to internet hub, etc.
- A directory of city neighborhood programs with a profile of each program, a link to their city's web site, etc.
- A directory of neighborhoods for each city, with self-managed neighborhood pages, indexed within the directory of cities, including basic contact information, a link to the neighborhood's web page, etc.
- A structured, searchable "best practices" database of neighborhood projects throughout the country
- Occasional surveys developed and distributed in conjunction with topical blogs
- Video content covering items such as neighborhood news stories, online training sessions, keynote speeches from the relevant conferences, etc.

Web technology has been an invaluable component of our work with neighborhood groups across Minneapolis. Without these tools, we would have had much greater difficulty coordinating the development and implementation of individual neighborhood plans for each of Minneapolis' neighborhoods and tracking the millions of dollars of direct NRP investment in those plans.

The amount and complexity of our neighborhood-driven activity, the number of new volunteers and staff that come into our program on a regular basis, and the ever-increasing need to manage and share information effectively among all of the program's stakeholders has challenged us to continually upgrade our technological capabilities.

Managing the flow of communications among the wealth of neighborhood programs, staff and volunteers across the country presents a similar challenge. The right mix of technological tools could be combined into an internet hub that enables cost-effective, regular and diverse communications among our colleagues and provides a wealth of information to neighborhood groups through a highly structured, easily searchable database.

Neighborhoods USA (NUSA) is a national non-profit organization committed to building and strengthening neighborhood organizations. It understands the challenges inherent in creating a national network of neighborhood practitioners.

It was created in 1975 to share information and experiences with the goal of building stronger communities. Its organizational mission is to build and strengthen neighborhood associations and to promote productive communications and collaborations between those associations and both the public and private sectors. For over thirty years, it has conducted an annual conference to bring together people from across the country to discuss pressing neighborhood issues, share experiences and offer each other encouragement or assistance.

Today the organization maintains a stable membership base of 68 cities, approximately 1,000 individuals and an annual conference attendance ranging from 600-900 participants.

NUSA's strengths are obvious. It has a longstanding national network of neighborhood programs, staff and volunteers, and it has the experience that comes with managing such a network over several decades. It also has an understanding of the unique challenges inherent in creating a national network of neighborhood practitioners.

NRP's strengths derive from the breadth and depth of its work with 81 neighborhoods – represented by 72 neighborhood organizations - in one major US city. NRP has worked with neighborhoods on a wide range of local initiatives over the past two decades, put in place a variety of mechanisms to help staff and volunteers communicate effectively with each other, and developed the technologies required to manage a complex range of investments, activities and communications.

We have been discussing the results of our recent survey and the questions and issues that it raised with the Board Chair of NUSA. He has suggested that we combine the strengths and knowledge of our two organizations to establish a new national communication and interaction network. He has received considerable support for this idea from other NUSA Board members and I have now received a request from him to develop a proposal for action by their Board. The approach that we will be proposing would revolve around pursuing joint applications for funding from various national foundations that presently are unavailable to either organization. We have clearly indicated to NUSA that the NRP program will assist with implementation only if the direct and indirect costs that we incur are covered by external sources.

Since the potential for a partnership with NUSA now appears possible, I am requesting that the Policy Board consider the following resolution:

**RESOLVED**, That the Minneapolis Neighborhood Revitalization Program (NRP) Policy Board (Board) agrees that NRP should pursue a possible partnership with Neighborhoods USA (NUSA) to develop web tools to foster more avenues of communication with neighborhood programs and neighborhood organizations across the country; and

**FURTHER RESOLVED**, That the Board authorizes the Director to: (1) enter into a Memorandum of Understanding with NUSA to pursue this joint effort with the stated condition that implementation shall only occur if sufficient resources are secured from non NRP resources to fully pay for implementation; and (2) develop and submit grant proposals with NUSA to pursue funding for implementing the agreed upon project; and

**FURTHER RESOLVED**, That the Director shall update the Board on this project no later than the Board meeting of July 27, 2009.