

Center for Neighborhoods
The 11th Annual
State of the Neighborhoods Address
Citizen of the City / City of the Citizen:
How Communities and City Hall Interact

*This event was held May 11, 2005
at the Humphrey Center
at the University of Minnesota
and featured a panel discussion
with former mayors
Gail Dorfman (St. Louis Park),
Don Fraser (Minneapolis)
and Jim Scheibel (St. Paul)
and current mayor Linda Loomis
(Golden Valley)*

Opening Remarks

*Presented by Andriana Abariotes
Center for Neighborhoods Board Member*

Good evening, and welcome to the 11th annual Center for Neighborhoods' State of the Neighborhoods Address: **Citizen of the City / City of the Citizen: How Communities and City Hall Interact.**

My name is Andriana Abariotes, Board Member of the Center for Neighborhoods, and Program Officer for the Twin Cities Local Initiatives Support Corporation. Gretchen Nicholls, our Executive Director, sends her regards and apologizes for missing tonight's festivities. As we speak, she is at Harvard with representatives from the City of Minneapolis presenting the Corridor Housing Initiative as a finalist for a national award from the Kennedy School's Ash Institute for Democratic Governance and Innovation. Another shining example of how our local communities and cities are defining positive ways to collaborate in partnership, garnishing national recognition and praise.

The State of the Neighborhoods Address is an annual event to bring people together from around the region to be in dialogue about how we are involved in making our communities better and how we grapple with the challenges and opportunities made evident at the neighborhood level. The Center for Neighborhoods is a nonprofit organization that serves as an incubator for new models of public sector and community collaboration, addressing both emerging and persistent challenges in innovative ways and providing neutral settings for public leaders, communities, and citizens to communicate about the issues the Twin Cities face as a region.

I would like to begin by offering our thanks and appreciation to the sponsors of tonight's event: Wells Fargo, The Northwest Area Foundation, and the University of Minnesota's Center for Urban and Regional Affairs (CURA). Each of these organizations is dedicated to the communities that they serve and critical partners in the work that we do in neighborhoods.

I also want to take this opportunity to acknowledge the board and staff of the Center for Neighborhoods - (board members please stand) - and I'd like to give a special thanks to Becky Clawson for her work in coordinating this event and providing the video-taped portions of tonight's presentation.

For the past several years, we have made great progress in neighborhoods throughout the region. Reinvestment in core inner-city neighborhoods, appreciating housing markets, and regional job growth have had positive effects in the communities in which we live and work. The Twin Cities is also blessed with a strong neighborhood and community infrastructure that has helped guide investment and addressed challenges across communities. But as we all know, it's not all one big bed of roses. While our region is renown for our community progress and rich array of neighborhood and community-based organizations, we often find ourselves asking how we can do better.

- Are we fully tapping these resources as partners and collaborators?
- Are the ways in which our cities offer access points for citizens to provide input creating meaningful citizen and community participation?
- Or, are people often left frustrated by foggy processes and muddled expectations that these systems may imply?

As we gear up for a city election year, in at least two of the major cities in the region, we find meaningful citizen participation and community engagement to be an issue that begs to be addressed. We ask what is

the role of community engagement in city governance?

To help us think about those questions we have invited an esteemed panel of former mayors from Minneapolis, St. Paul, and St. Louis Park, each with a structure of organizations that support citizen participation, and the current mayor from Golden Valley where they are working to define ways to engage the community on critical issues.

Also featured in our conversation, our “celebrities of the evening,” are a handful of community leaders that are shaping the ways residents and other community stakeholders engage with a range of issues. Their work in the community and the questions they have identified will prompt the panelists and audience to reflect on how community engagement matters to city governance.

Let’s begin by trying to define what we mean by a “community engagement system.” A key problem is that “community engagement” means different things to different people. Defining terms is an important first step toward greater accountability for how those systems work. However, there seems to be some level of ambiguity about what engagement means and how it’s done. One example of an attempt occurred last year as a task force appointed by Minneapolis City Council Members offered the following definition (which was not adopted by the Council) for citizen participation and engagement:

A clear, comprehensive, and coordinated range of options that:

- 1.) are user-friendly and easily accessible to City residents;*
- 2.) provide requested and/or necessary information about issues affecting City residents and their communities; and*
- 3.) ensure meaningful, respectful resident participation in decision-making regarding these issues to the greatest degree possible within clear and reasonable parameters as established by City policies, practices, and procedures.*

Bearing in mind that neighborhood and community-based organizations do not exist solely for the purpose of City processes and programs, they still must relate to the City by engaging their communities in many different ways. These organizations take the best of their work to meld with City community engagement systems to build public-private collaboration (some might say, in spite of City processes).

To provide greater clarity, it’s probably helpful to try to break down the concept of city-oriented citizen participation systems into digestible pieces:

One level is **communication** - how a City keeps its constituencies informed about what’s going on in the city, and vice versa.

The second level is **advisory** - providing citizen input on specific questions regarding City policies and resources. Examples include land use and zoning issues, and street repaving projects.

The third level is **collaboration** - when communities and the City work in partnership to address issues, such as affordable housing production, economic development initiatives, community crime prevention and restorative justice.

Yet, even with roles defined, questions remain. When a City wants to engage the community, is it always clear which level they are operating from? Is the process clearly defined so that people know how decisions will be made? And how do people know when they can have input on an issue being decided? Is there follow-up to let people know what input was gathered, and how it informed the decision? Are we clear on the roles and responsibilities, both of the City and community partners, in defining and implementing the community engagement process?

The League of Women Voters of Minneapolis issued a report in April 2005 titled “Minneapolis Government: A Balancing Act.” A panel reviewing the findings deliberated over whether the structure of government mattered as much as the leadership and the use of human resources to create a successful city. Their

analogy can also be extended to the realm of community involvement.

While some see a chaotic marketplace of community interests and voices, others see a rich potential of community assets. It's time we shift our focus to identify how our cities can more directly benefit from those assets.

For example - the **environmental movement**. A recent program on public television described the demise of the environmental movement, noting that the time of white, charismatic men, the heroes of environmental stewardship and leaders of the environmental movement, was a thing of the past. What this critique missed is that the environmental movement has shifted to an army of lesser-known leaders and volunteers at the grassroots level. People that care about the environmental quality of their neighborhoods and cities are where the movement lives today. Dedicating themselves to environmental justice, and finding ways to strengthen the environmental quality of where they live. You'll hear from one of those leaders tonight—we ask "how can cities tap these neighborhood or community-based assets for the greater good of the community or region as a whole?"

Neighborhoods and communities help a City prepare for the future while preserving our identity. Minneapolis' NRP and the St. Paul district councils have been integral for shaping our sense of place. As our region continues to change, new models like the Minneapolis Corridor Housing Initiative, currently a candidate for a national award for government innovation in housing that will soon be expanded to St. Paul and partnering suburban communities, seeks to involve the community in proactive planning to respond to the need for greater housing density that enhances transit and retail amenities.

Third, our **cities are stronger when parts become a whole**. St. Paul's West Side, and the Neighborhood Learning Community, tells the tale of how collaboration can be transforming for a neighborhood. Working together, the community organizations in the area have created a West Side circulator to transport kids to youth centers and programs. Shifting from organizational programs to neighborhood programs, the broader community is focused on youth and learning, bringing people and resources together in unprecedented ways.

Lastly, **seeing our diversity as an asset**, not a detriment. Our communities of color are contributing members of any city, wanting access to economic security for themselves and their families. But they are not necessarily treated as equal partners in the Cities community engagement systems. Instead of deterring their involvement, we must find more effective ways to engage and collaborate with communities of color as co-creators of our cities.

Tonight's panel discussion will take stock in where we are today, and reflect on our opportunities in this election year to clarify and improve, and in some cities - create - our community engagement systems.

As public resources continue to wane or diminish (including federal CDBG resources), how do we preserve this work at the community level? We all understand that money is an important element in how the system works. But for the purposes of tonight's conversation, money is not the focus. Our goal is to clarify the value of community engagement so that City officials will want to support it. Tonight is our opportunity to learn from each other and to support cities throughout the region to better engage citizens in making their communities and neighborhoods great places to live and work.

To take us into that conversation I would like to introduce Roger Meyer, Center for Neighborhoods Board President, who will facilitate the panel discussion. Thank you.



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