

Community Partnerships:  
A Sustainable Resource for Nongovernmental Organizations  
By  
Mark Tranel and Kay Gasen  
Public Policy Research Center  
University of Missouri-St. Louis

**INTRODUCTION**

There was a time not so long ago when community organizing was the accepted model for effecting change in urban neighborhoods of the poor and underserved. Private and public targets responsible for oppressing these people would be identified for personal attack until they surrendered power and/or resources (Eichler, 1995). This model was not sustainable because the targets changed over time. Urban communities were largely forsaken by private capital, and through block grant programs and devolution, government directed more and more decision making to the local level (Essenburg, 2000). The problems of abandonment, disinvestment, poverty, and unemployment that motivated confrontation persisted. Community development has emerged as the contemporary paradigm for bringing neighborhood residents together to create growing and vibrant communities. There can, however, be wide variations in how the community development model is applied.

Community development is not end products such as commercial buildings, new housing, and social service programs. It is “a process by which people are empowered to affect the course of social and economic change, following priorities that they set according to community, democratic, and other values. It has perhaps rather more to do with the concept of sustainability than the concept of growth.” (Kilpatrick, et al, 2002)

Until recently the process engaged experts (Spruill, et al, 2001) who designed a federally funded program of capital improvements and social services and then left the community when the funds ran out. While there has been a transfer of control from the federal to the local level, there has not been an equivalent transfer of resources. An example is the Empowerment Zone program.

Empowerment zones were designed to wipe away categorical federal programming and provide \$100 million based on a strategic plan developed through significant citizen participation. An initial round of communities were funded at this level, but subsequent years have seen about 80 percent of the grant funds withdrawn from the federal commitment (DePledge, 2002). This same trend of dwindling funding has played out over a large number of federal programs.

Communities thus have been forced to look elsewhere for resources. More and more this process involves the identification of institutional partners. Rather than confronting institutions, communities now seek them out for cooperation. Foundations and all levels of government encourage the formation of partnerships (Smith, 1997). Demands for accountability and efficiency are increasing the stress on existing community-based programs, and partnerships are a means to acquire not only financial resources but also professional expertise (Lamb, et al, 1998).

This paper examines partnerships between communities and a range of institutions formerly targets for confrontation: universities, private business, and nonprofit organizations.

## **COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS**

A community partnership is a user-defined term applied by government at all levels, universities, school districts, private business, and nonprofit organizations. In the community development movement, community partnerships are a relatively recent phenomenon, developing initially about a decade ago but gaining increasing momentum in the last five years. Efforts labeled as community partnerships, however, take a variety of forms and can refer to rather divergent relationships. Some institutions call a web-based information directory a community partnership. Others use the term community partnership for institutionally selected services delivered to special populations. A fee-based consulting service has been called a community partnership. Community partnerships have been established for the purpose of producing physical improvements such as housing and commercial space or they can result from social service planning.

## Categories of Partnerships

In recent years, there has been a significant increase at the federal, state, and local levels in the number of institutional “sponsors” of partnerships focusing on community improvement.

Examples of institutional sponsors for partnerships are:

- *Federal* - The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) provides Community Outreach Partnership Center (COPC) grants to institutions of higher learning to create partnerships with neighborhoods and to develop multidisciplinary neighborhood interventions. (OUP, 2002)
- *State* - The Tennessee Association of Community Partnerships uses information technology to support economic development through public/private partnerships. Community partners can be individuals or institutions working toward community and workforce development. (TNAC, Association)
- *University* - The University of Wisconsin Oshkosh Center for Community Partnerships is a fee-for-service resource for business development partnering with insurance, advertising, and finance organizations. (UWO, CCP)
- *Corporate* - The Allstate Insurance Company’s Model for Community Partnerships works on issues of crime, fire safety, and abandoned buildings to prevent insurance losses in Philadelphia neighborhoods, viewing the neighborhoods not as social liabilities but as potential customers (McNeil, 1995).
- *National Nonprofit* - With funding from the Department of Justice’s Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the National Civic League created a new division called Federal-Community Partnerships (FCP). The FCP serves as coordinator for the training and technical assistance program interventions targeted at young children in 11 cities around the United States. (National Civic League, FCP)

## Characteristics of Community Partnerships

From a community development perspective the test for these partnerships is whether or not they actually contribute to what Kilpatrick, et al, (2002) define as empowering people for social and economic change. In separate tracts, previous research has examined two dimensions of

community development: social capacity and organizational capacity. While acknowledging the literature is vague in defining partnerships, Walzer and York state, “A meaningful discussion of partnerships requires a clear identification of the partners, type of investments made, and the outcomes expected from the ventures” (Walzer and York, 1998). Many definitions offered by organizations linking community and institutional interests, including those represented in this paper, list components of close mutual cooperation, common goals, shared involvement in decision-making, sharing risks as well as benefits, common interests, responsibilities, and power. These descriptors focus on both the ***process*** of the partnership (e.g. shared decision-making, shared power) and the ***capacity*** of each partner to assume responsibility for a share of the work.

A growing body of research calls attention to the role of social capital, or community social capacity, as the source of the ability to identify problems and needs, achieve a workable consensus on goals and priorities, and work in partnership with other organizations to achieve goals (Mattessich & Monsey, 1997).

The Rockefeller Institute (1997) identifies four attributes of social capital or capacity:

- *Attachment/identification* - Measured by such factors as the percentage of residents who report that the neighborhood has a name or feel stronger attachment to the neighborhood than to the city at large.
- *Neighboring* - Measured by what neighbors report as the frequency that they visit one another; help one another with tasks; or the proportion of respondents who report that a large share of their neighbors are friends.
- *Organizational/associational infrastructure* - Measured by the number and type of organizations or groups present in the neighborhood; the proportion of residents who report the presence of groups that deal with neighborhood issues; and the degree to which residents report having a sense that there are people in their neighborhood with whom to talk about and work together on issues.
- *Political/civic engagement* – Measured by electoral registration, turnout; or membership in lobbying or advocacy organizations.

Chaskin offers another framework to look at community capacity, suggesting four fundamental characteristics: a sense of community, portraying a degree of connectedness among members; a level of commitment, investing time and energy in community well-being, often funneled into local organizations; mechanisms for problem-solving, addressing issues and taking collective action with external organizations; and access to resources, human, financial and through commitments of institutional partners (Chaskin, 1999). In the context of partnerships, without community capacity, neighborhoods are at risk of being merely the recipient of good or services, rather than a true partner in revitalization efforts in their neighborhood.

In addition to levels of social or community capacity, in order to function as a partner, each organization must have a degree of organizational capacity to manage projects and budgets and establish manageable objectives in order to keep people involved (Chaskin & Peters, 2000). Designing projects that provide clear roles for residents is essential in ensuring resident involvement. If only one side of the partnership is involved in actual project management, there is no assurance that it is representative of shared interests or that there is any capacity for sustainability.

Along with the individual capacity of each partner, it is important to examine the *process* of the actual partnership. There are a number of properties that should be assessed when considering how the ‘community’ and the ‘partnership’ establish and sustain a relationship. The locus of control for these properties is critical to the sustainability of the partnership and the community development initiative. Table 1 identifies four categories of properties important in a community partnership.

Table 1  
Partnership Control Properties

	<b>Community</b>	<b>Institution</b>
<b>Leadership</b>		
<b>Primary funding</b>		

<b>Goals</b>		
<b>Process</b>		

1. Leadership – There are many styles of leadership in both formal and informal organizational structures. The key here is who is providing the leadership in the partnership.
2. Primary Funding – An institutional partner can bring resources to the table and limit discussion to those resources, can bring linkage to resources, or there can be a cooperative effort to secure ‘unattached’ resources.
3. Goals – goals can be set in the absence of resources. They can be developed through consensus decision-making or they can be accepted because one party in the discussion is the ‘expert.’
4. Process – Decision processes in community organizations and community institutions can be either inclusive or exclusive. Important to community development is how actively, and deeply, was the community engaged.

This paper compares and contrasts the dimensions of social capacity and organizational capacity in two neighborhood redevelopment initiatives in the city of St. Louis, Missouri. The paper focuses on a three- to four-year time period in each neighborhood, occurring when the institutional partnerships were initiated. In one case the organizational capacity of the external partner dominated the development agenda and in the other the social capacity of the community organization sustained the initiative until it linked to an institutional partner.

#### **DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES IN TWO COMMUNITIES**

The city of St. Louis is notorious as the epitome of urban decline. In the last four decades St. Louis lost 50 percent of its population and 60 percent of its employment base. Less well known is how this change impacts community-based nongovernmental organizations<sup>1</sup> (NGOs) within the city, and in particular, how they have met the challenge of sustainability.

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<sup>1</sup> The term nongovernmental organization is applied here as it is generally used in international reference to local organizations that “amplify the voices of the poorest people in the decisions that affect their lives, improve

The political structure of the city of St. Louis places NGOs in a pivotal role. There are 28 wards in the city and considerable administrative as well as political power rests with the aldermen. The aldermen have competing constituencies within their wards because the City is also organized into 79 neighborhoods, most with their own NGO. There is a wide range of social and organizational capacity across this large number of NGOs. These capacities are critical to the quality of life in that neighborhood. The NGOs vie at the ward level for scarce public (local, state, and federal) resources allocated by their aldermen for housing and infrastructure improvements, and social services.

This study examines two St. Louis neighborhoods, both with a long history of economic decline and a recent series of institutional partnerships developed to supplement meager public resources. Information for the analysis of the development initiatives in the two communities came from interviews with current and former staff of the NGOs, the institutional partners, neighborhood residents, historical records of the organizations, and documents from the planning and public participation processes.

### ***Forest Park Southeast***

The Forest Park Southeast (FPSE) neighborhood is located about three miles west of downtown St. Louis. It takes its name from its physical location relative to Forest Park; a 1,372-acre urban park that is one of cultural crown jewels of St. Louis. It was the site of the 1904 World's Fair. There are several major regional institutions, the Art Museum, the Missouri History Museum, the Science Center, and the Zoological Park in Forest Park. Just east of Forest Park and directly north of FPSE is a medical complex that includes several regional hospitals and Washington University's Medical Center.

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development effectiveness and sustainability.” The World Bank and Civil Society (n.d.) Retrieved January 29, 2003 from <http://wbln0018.worldbank.org/essd/essd.nsf/NGOs/home>.

The neighborhood has fairly distinct boundaries, as it is situated within a network of highways and high-speed arterials. Internally it is bisected by a Manchester Avenue, a major commercial thoroughfare, which, as will be seen, is one of the most important challenges to building community within the geography of the neighborhood.

In 1940, FPSE reached its largest resident population at 10,500. The 2000 Census recorded about 4,000 residents. While the community lost population it also changed demographically. The population was essentially all white in 1940. By 2000, it was racially mixed. While a majority of the residents are African American, there are notable numbers of ethnic groups and a sizable white population. These groups live in identifiable clusters within the neighborhood, socially fragmenting it.

The housing in the Forest Park Southeast neighborhood that was in great demand at the turn of the century now suffers from neglect and disinvestment. The neighborhood has all but lost its commercial strip on Manchester Avenue. Today, it houses a few convenience shops and industry amid mostly boarded-up storefronts. Prior to the most recent development efforts, the neighborhood had gradually lost its sense of community and cohesion. These factors, among others, have bred large-scale societal problems such as drug abuse, crime, and poverty.

#### A Plethora of Organizations

The physical and social fragmentation is manifested in the organizational structure in FPSE. The community has five sub-neighborhood improvement associations: the Adams Grove Neighborhood Association, the Adams Grove Block Unit, the Gibson Heights Neighborhood Association, the New Boyle Improvement Association, and Ranken East. The improvement associations are unincorporated, volunteer groups of residents that serve primarily an information exchange function. There is an informal umbrella structure, the Forest Park Southeast Community

Council. The Community Council has representation from all five improvement associations as well as business members, social service providers and clergy.

The only community-wide formal organization is the Forest Park Southeast Housing Corporation. The Housing Corporation is an incorporated 501(c)(3) organization with full time staff and a governance structure including a board of directors that has legal authority to own property, enter into contracts, and otherwise operate formally.<sup>2</sup> It is inclusive of the entire neighborhood in its activities, but its mission is limited to housing and housing related issues. One of Walzer and York's (1998) key criteria for discussing partnerships is identification of the partners. For the development process that evolved in Forest Park Southeast, the Housing Corporation was the only community-based association that could function as an NGO.

### The Process of Partnership

Just as the name for Forest Park Southeast came not from something within it but from a major city landmark that it borders, the primary actors for a major community development initiative came not from within the community but from a major institution it borders. Washington University's Medical Center established a redevelopment corporation in the early 1970s for the purposes of securing land for the physical expansion of the Medical Center and responding to the urban decay that had enveloped it. In 1974 FPSE's 17<sup>th</sup> Ward alderman was instrumental in persuading the Washington University Medical Center Redevelopment Corporation (MCRC) to include the Gibson Heights section of FPSE in its revitalization plan. For two decades, however, the MCRC focused its efforts on the communities to its north and east, not its neighbor to the south. (St. Louis/5-year strategy)

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<sup>2</sup> The Forest Park Southeast Community Council incorporated in 2001, after most of the activities discussed in this paper. The Council does not have a staff, office location, or other formal organizational structure than the 501(c)(3) status.

The stimulus for a more active partnership came in 1995 with a 5-year \$2.4 million Joint Community Development (JCD) grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). HUD awarded these grants to higher learning institutions to undertake community revitalization programs in partnership with community residents. JCD grants were a predecessor to the HUD Community Outreach Partnership Center grants. Washington University staff initially learned about the possibility of applying for JCD funds, but only shortly before the deadline for proposals. They wrote the grant proposal, with assistance from the staff of the Forest Park Southeast Housing Corporation. Grant activities included converting two- and four-family flats into marketable rental units and townhouses; establishing a management assistance program to help landlords; increasing security by expanding the Neighborhood Safety Network; and improving streets and lighting and landscaping of public spaces. (Washington University, 1995) Washington University would be the recipient of the grant funds, administered through its Medical Center Redevelopment Corporation. The grant enhanced the organizational capacity of MCRC by creating a full time staff person working for MCRC, but did not improve the capacity of the Housing Corporation or any of the improvement associations.

Following the grant award, the MCRC appointed a 30-member Community Advisory Group (CAG), designed to "... fine tune the plan to fit the neighborhood requirements within the framework of federal regulations." (Washington University, 1996) Several projects got off to a quick start, including university student involvement in clean-up and landscaping projects and access to a free health care clinic for neighborhood residents. The more complex physical development activities, such as housing development, became mired in the physical and social divisions in the community.

There were conflicts over the CAG. The various sub-neighborhood organizations did not all feel adequately represented on the CAG and some claimed investment in physical improvements

was not equitable across FPSE, especially those north of Manchester Road. The housing activities supported by the grant caused the staff of the MCRC to work more closely with the Forest Park Southeast Housing Corporation than with some of the other organizations, as well as the fact that the Housing Corporation was the only formal organization with which MCRC could interact. The administration of the partnership between the Medical Center and FPSE became more complex in 1998, when MCRC subcontracted program management of the HUD grant to McCormack Baron & Associates, a private development firm, which continued the work outlined in the HUD grant (Washington University, 2000).

In addition to the involvement of MCRC and its contract administrator McCormack Baron, another institutional partner entered the scene in 1998. FPSE was selected to be one of the first neighborhoods included in a new regional Sustainable Neighborhoods Initiative (SNI). A planning organization for metropolitan St. Louis developed a set of goals to make dramatic improvements in the region by the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1904 World's Fair. The goal of the SNI was to "... successfully integrate the strategies of human services, community development and economic development at the neighborhood level through a citizen and resident-driven planning and implementation process" (ARCHS, History). A Sustainable Neighborhood Steering Committee of the planning organization selected nine neighborhoods for the program, using criteria focusing on neighborhood needs and capacity for success. After the fact, Forest Park Southeast residents were informed that their neighborhood was one of the nine selected for the initiative.

The SNI boasted support from eighteen financial institutions and a number of other institutional partners to revitalize distressed St. Louis area neighborhoods. Similar to the Washington University partnership, the Sustainable Neighborhood Initiative included plans to develop a "community-driven" revitalization planning process, to include both physical development and human service components. Area Resources for Community and Human Services

(ARCHS), a public/private partnership collaborating with eight Missouri state agencies, managed the initiative. The Sustainable Neighborhood partnerships were to focus on achieving positive outcomes in six Missouri Core Results established to measure performance of the state agencies: parents working; children safe; children and families health; young children ready to enter school; children succeeding in school; and youth ready to enter the workforce (ARCHS, About). As was the case with MCRC, ARCHS organizational capacity was enhanced by a paid staff position to serve as neighborhood facilitator, but the initiative provided no resources to develop the capacity of the indigenous organizations.

At about the same time the ARCHS staff was developing a neighborhood plan, MCRC began to prepare a master plan for FPSE to sustain its community revitalization efforts after the JCD grant. This initiated a complex interaction of community organizations and institutional partners. The ARCHS staff worked with the FPSE Community Council to draft a revitalization and human services plan for the SNI in June 1999. Continuing its work for MCRC, McCormack Baron retained Urban Design Associates, a Pittsburgh based architectural firm, to prepare a FPSE revitalization plan completed in July 1999 (St. Louis, Plan). The community connection for MCRC continued to be the FPSE Housing Corporation. Both processes created opportunities for community input through public meetings, interviews, focus groups, and design charettes.

#### Motivations for Partnership

Many institutions are motivated to become involved in community partnerships because of “enlightened self-interest.” Often this is represented by significant real estate and physical plant investments made by anchor institutions to improve the surrounding neighborhoods (Fulbright-Anderson, et al, 2001). Universities may be concerned about their ability to recruit students if the neighborhood is perceived as being unsafe, or health care institutions may be concerned about the safety of staff that works late shifts. For Washington University, the viability and the safety of the

neighborhood was a primary concern. “The University has a real stake in the safety of these areas. We want both our students and our neighbors to feel secure, and we’re committed to being part of the solution” (Rogers, 2001).

Institutions also become involved in community partnerships as part of their mission or tradition to serve the community or to address the needs of citizens. ARCHS, representing eight state agencies stated a belief that “... neighborhoods are the best place to offer ready access and availability of high quality services and support for families, children and individuals” (ARCHS, About).

For communities such as Forest Park Southeast, a partnership with a major anchor institution can also be viewed as self-interest. There were many areas of need in FPSE, including concerns about the lack of a neighborhood school, the loss of housing stock and the steady decline in economic opportunities. Partnerships with institutions were viewed as leading to human and financial resources that can benefit residents. In the case of the Sustainable Neighborhoods Initiative, the invitation for the neighborhood to participate was accompanied by a promise of staff assistance and financial support from eighteen financial institutions. In addition, some neighborhood residents viewed engaging in a working relationship with major institutions as a vehicle to help control or shape physical developments that were going to occur in the neighborhood regardless of resident involvement.

### The Capacities of the Partners

In many communities, the relationships with institutions may range from short-term project-oriented situations to long-range shared decision-making ventures. In Forest Park Southeast, both institutional partnerships that were examined incorporated a long-term commitment (at least three years) and included some degree of joint planning and shared decision-making.

Both partnerships originated outside of the neighborhood, with either an external funding source providing resources for partnership activities or the neighborhood being designated by external parties as a site for revitalization. In the case of the partnership between Washington University and Forest Park Southeast, the University, the city of St. Louis, and the Forest Park Southeast Housing Corporation signed a formal agreement outlining “terms and conditions.” (St. Louis, Terms and Conditions) In both partnerships, neighborhood residents were encouraged to serve in a planning and coordinating role, but financial resources were channeled to the institutional partners. Identifying local partners was challenging because of the lack of an overall neighborhood association other than the Housing Corporation.

The neighborhood’s partnership with the Washington University Medical Center Redevelopment Corporation began with the appointment of a Community Advisory Group (CAG). This arrangement appears to be prevalent in community partnerships with universities, with a community committee functioning as a sounding board (Fulbright-Anderson, et al, 2001). In the case of Forest Park Southeast, the community advisory body had the opportunity to make suggestions, but it was not evident that members felt that there was a guarantee that the institution would act on the recommendations surfaced by the Group. Minutes from a Community Council meeting after the CAG was dissolved indicated four problems with the group: 1) representatives were appointed solely by the Medical Center; 2) the group had no “real authority” but instead was merely advisory; 3) there was no relationship-building among members to develop trust; and 4) there was no relationship between the CAG and the staff working on the partnership. (St. Louis, 1999)

Experience with the CAG led to the decision to have a more broad-based organization for the continued revitalization of FPSE under the HUD grant and through other efforts. The Forest Park Southeast Community Council was formed in 1999. (St. Louis, 2001) The Community Council suffered from difficulties among members and a focus on the representation of groups rather than

the neighborhood as a whole. In November 2000, an anonymous letter asked selected members of the Community Council to “please resign” so that those remaining could proceed in a three-step process as the leadership team without any dissension or personal disagreements. Remaining members of the council, with others, adopted an Interdependence Proclamation stating the history of the Council and the future course for making neighborhood decisions by a body that is “... a fair cross-section of the neighborhood, even when economic status is considered.” (St. Louis, Neighborhood Democracy).

Despite the difficulties in establishing community involvement beyond public hearings and focus groups, the MCRC and McCormack Baron partnership had considerable physical impact on the community. They leveraged additional funds to match the JCD grant. The Medical Center invested \$2.6 million and a combination of other institutions invested \$6 million. These funds completed a number of development projects in Forest Park Southeast including reopening Adams School, the neighborhood public school which closed in 1993, building a new community center, housing construction and rehabilitation, and improvements to three neighborhood parks.

### Involvement of Residents

The process and level of engaging residents is consistently cited as critical for establishing the legitimacy of an effort involving decision-making and action on behalf of a neighborhood. (Chaskin & Peters, 2000). Both partnerships in the Forest Park Southeast neighborhood attempted strategies to engage residents, ranging from advisory groups and leadership teams to public meetings and focus groups. However, the neighborhood infrastructure – or the lack thereof – made this especially challenging.

The Forest Park Southeast neighborhood includes five neighborhood associations and one business association, along with the Forest Park Southeast Housing Development. Attempts to develop an “at large” neighborhood committee often got bogged down in concerns related to the

actual location of proposed development; i.e. whether a different/better house is built North of Manchester Road than is built South of Manchester, or perceptions of who was benefiting from jobs or contracts. (St. Louis, 2002). The MCRC developed a cooperative working relationship with the Housing Corporation; however many residents questioned the motives of the Housing Corporation and there was little coordination between the Housing Corporation and the Community Council. (St. Louis, 1999)

Despite structural challenges, much energy was devoted to organizing meetings and keeping records to foster citizen participation. A neighborhood website also provided access to residents interested in following the work of the partnership efforts. Detailed records show strong meeting attendance representing both council members and other residents and a firm commitment by residents to improve the neighborhood and make the partnerships work.

#### Examination of partnership control properties

##### **1. Leadership**

Key leadership components for neighborhood partners include resident leaders who can communicate effectively, motivate others, organize the work and represent the neighborhood's interest to stakeholders and potential partners. Institutions involved in community partnerships need leadership positions that are accessible, can communicate on the neighborhood level, and represent a broad institutional commitment. Should institution/community partnerships pursue shared decision-making and authority, the situations often call for skilled communication and management on the part of the neighborhood and the ability to be flexible and give up control on the part of the institution.

Institutional staff, whose primary job was to work with the neighborhood in developing plans and priorities, largely drove the leadership in the Forest Park Southeast partnerships. Particularly in the case of the Washington University/McCormack Baron partnership, the staff was able to clearly identify their priorities and the steps to achieve them, and in the absence of coordinated neighborhood leadership capacity, worked to move their agenda forward.

The leadership for the neighborhood was less stable, as the neighborhood continued to change leadership structure and struggled with internal conflicts. The Community

Council minutes include multiple reports of infighting, disagreements over whether members were sufficiently notified of plans, and struggles with trust and control with external partners.

## **2. Primary Funding**

In both partnerships in Forest Park Southeast, the institutional partners brought resources to the table, targeted for specific projects in the neighborhood. In the case of the Washington University / McCormack Baron partnership, the HUD funds awarded to the University served as a foundation for a variety of projects and was leveraged to acquire additional funding for the Adams School project. The Sustainable Neighborhoods Initiative linked the neighborhood to potential funding sources, which were to be accessed after a revitalization a plan was submitted to ARCHS.

## **3. Goals**

The Washington University partnership began with a set of goals and priorities defined in their HUD Joint Community Development grant. A neighborhood planning process led by staff of the institutional partners then identified additional goals, as did the process developed through the Sustainable Neighborhoods Initiative. While there was some concern on the part of residents regarding the inclusiveness of each process, both clearly identified the re-opening of Adams School as their priority issue.

## **4. Process**

Community building and community improvement initiatives are more likely to succeed when they focus on task and goal accomplishment (product) and relationship and capacity building (process) concurrently. (Mattessich & Monsey). The partnerships project in Forest Park Southeast were primarily focused on task accomplishment and were staffed with skilled personnel representing state agencies, a consulting firm and a university with a multitude of resources. The institutional representatives were able to organize the work and harness resources sufficient to accomplish several of the neighborhood's top priorities.

The neighborhood group also attempted to focus on task accomplishment by building a structure to guide participation of council members, input from residents, and decision-making by voting. A lengthy constitution includes guidelines on rules of conduct, endorsement of political candidates and ground rules. Minutes of meetings were often

debated for accuracy, with suggestions to hire someone to take minutes. While the Community Council worked hard to develop a structure to get the work done, there was little effort to build a sense of teamwork or shared vision. Minutes reflect a desire for a leadership retreat to “work on trust, team building and getting to know each other.” (St. Louis, 1999) While there were efforts on the part of institutional partners to coordinate and integrate planning processes, the neighborhood council struggled with involvement in the planning processes and feeling part of it.

### ***Old North St. Louis***

Old North St. Louis is also a neighborhood named for its dominant neighbor. While the name originally referred to the old 15-block city of St. Louis of the early 1800s, Old North St. Louis today is adjacent to downtown St. Louis. This near northside neighborhood is a national historic district. In the early 2000s it is regarded in the metropolitan area only as home to the oldest soda fountain in St. Louis, Crown Candy Kitchen. With its proximity to downtown, its historic setting and active community members, Old North St. Louis confronts both great potential and difficult challenges.

The Old North St. Louis neighborhood suffered one of the most precipitous population declines in the entire City. In 1940 Old North St. Louis had over 15,000 residents. Its resident population is only 1,500 sixty years later. The number of residents has been stable since the 1970s. The neighborhood was once an industrial center; however the construction of Interstate 70 in 1971 disconnected the neighborhood from its industrial sector to the east and furthered the abandonment as residents moved to the suburbs. The population loss precipitated the demolition of empty residential structures. Particularly during the 1970s the pace of housing demolition in the neighborhood increased, leaving about one-third of the land parcels vacant lots.

#### Limited Organizational Structure

Unlike the Forest Park Southeast neighborhood, Old North St. Louis is not adjacent to a physically expanding institution. Downtown St. Louis is not growing. Nevertheless, the

neighborhood has a long history of resident involvement and grass roots and volunteer efforts to tackle neighborhood problems.

Children in the Old North St. Louis neighborhood have access to Ames Visual and Performing Arts Elementary, Webster Middle School, and Clay Elementary in nearby Hyde Park. Ames is a part of the magnet school program and Clay, as a Community Education Center, provides GED and other programs and classes for residents. With the real danger of losing their accreditation, the St. Louis Public Schools have chosen several schools to put special focus on in an effort to improve education and test score performance. Webster Middle School is one of several such schools that are being termed "21st Century Schools." However, while the schools are located in the neighborhood, a large number of the neighborhood's children attend school in other locations throughout the city.

Grace Hill Neighborhood Services is located in Old North St. Louis. Grace Hill is a social service organization that provides health and neighborhood support services to residents throughout the City of St. Louis. Along with Grace Hill, Old North St. Louis is home to a variety of missions and shelters.

The neighborhood is served by a strong neighborhood organization, created in 1981. The Old North St. Louis Restoration Group began as an organization of homeowners doing what the Rockefeller Institute (1997) defines as neighboring activities: helping each other in the rehabilitation of homes, creating and maintaining community gardens and participating in a variety of neighborhood organizations and activities. Its origins were much like the Forest Park Southeast neighborhood associations, but it evolved into a NGO. Within the last five years, through partnerships and support of public and private funding agencies, the Restoration Group has intensified its efforts by developing a community rehabilitation plan, advocating for partners to invest in the community.

### The Process of Partnership

Concerned with blighting in the area, the Old North St. Louis Restoration Group (the Restoration Group) initiated a process of identifying redevelopment zones within the community and began to test their skills as a non-for-profit housing developer. In 1996, the Restoration Group launched its first housing rehab project, purchasing a four-family flat on Wright Street. With rehab beginning in the spring of 1997, the project served as the first step in a larger preservation project (St. Louis, Old North St. Louis).

Throughout the early and mid 1990s, the Restoration Group continued to make slow but steady progress on their redevelopment plan. During this time, the organization received limited funding support from the city of St. Louis through Community Development Block Grant funds, as well as small grants from foundations to support gardening projects. However, it was not until the late 1990s that the organization ventured to create a partnership with an institution outside of the neighborhood. Drawing on the organizational capacity of a skilled executive director and board members that included a resident architect, the Restoration Group approached the Regional Housing and Community Development Alliance (RHCDA). RHCDA is a not-for profit corporation that engages in two major activities: real estate development in distressed urban neighborhoods, and the provision of real estate-related technical assistance and training to nonprofit community-based organizations engaged in physical revitalization projects. (RHCDA, 2002)

The Restoration Group and the RHCDA entered into a partnership in 2001 as co-developers of the North Market Place development. By jointly forming Old North St. Louis Homes, Inc., the partnership created plans to co-develop over 100 new and renovated housing units. Groundbreaking is planned in spring 2003.

The Old North St. Louis Homes, Inc. partnership received funding support from several private and public sources, including a RHCDA collaborative grant, Empowerment Zone funding and historic tax credit equity. RHCDA and Restoration Group representatives are working with the

Archdiocese of St. Louis' Catholic Commission on Housing and Grace Hill Settlement House to raise \$200,00 to provide affordable housing to 20 percent of the homebuyers in the North Market Place Development. In addition, RHCDA is providing resources for capacity building for the Restoration Group, supporting a strategic planning process for the board and providing technical resources in financial planning and board development.

In 2000, the Restoration Group began working with the University of Missouri – St. Louis, culminating in the award of a HUD Community Outreach Partnership Center (COPC) grant to the University in October 2001. The COPC Program, an initiative of HUD's Office of University Partnerships, provides 3-year grants of up to \$400,000 to encourage institutions of higher education to join in partnerships with their communities. The Old North Neighborhood Partnership created initiatives to enhance the neighborhood's historical assets for tourism and marketing purposes and addressed issues related to environmental hazards in the neighborhood. A series of educational programs are offered to residents to assist with home maintenance and home ownership possibilities, and the University partnership provides technical assistance to the Restoration Group.

The board of directors of the Restoration Group serves as the management committee for the community/university partnership, assisted by a community advisory committee comprised of residents and institutional stakeholders. In addition, a full-time staff person is paid by the University and housed at the Restoration Group offices. In addition to providing coordination for grant-related projects, the staff position also works on other neighborhood projects on behalf of the Restoration Group.

#### Motivations for Partnership

The mission of the RHCDA is to build strong and healthy communities by assisting in the development of housing and other physical improvements. The organization focuses its resources on select communities in the City of St. Louis and St. Louis County. RHCDA staff cites the capacity of the Restoration Group to be self-sufficient as a primary motivator in developing the

partnership in the Old North St. Louis neighborhood. Because of the Restoration Group's staff capacity and housing plan (designed by an architect who is a member of the board) RHCDA agreed to serve as a co-developer for the North Market Place development. This is a role that they assume "... when our participation lends capacity to an organization ... and will serve as a capacity-building experience for them" (RHCDA, 2002).

Prior to 1999, the Restoration Group had concentrated their efforts within the neighborhood. They rarely sought external support or partnerships beyond a limited number of grant requests. Once the expanded housing development plan for North Market Street was completed, they realized the need for technical assistance and a financial partner. The Restoration Group sought out the RHCDA as a means to access resources to get the development completed.

The University of Missouri – St. Louis is a land-grant urban university and as such, has a mission to extend the resources for the university to communities in the St. Louis metropolitan area. With funding support from a HUD COPC grant, the University viewed the partnership as an opportunity to involve students and faculty in urban neighborhoods beyond the campus's inner-ring suburban setting. The Restoration Group perceived the University resources as a complement to the physical development plan, particular in areas of financial fitness and homeownership. In addition, there was a prior positive working relationship between University and Restoration Group staff, along with positive experiences with other university/community partnerships.

#### The Capacities of the Partners

Like the Forest Park Southeast partnerships, the Old North partnerships incorporated a long-term commitment and some degree of joint planning and shared decision-making. However, the Old North partnerships focused more on project development and management, in contrast to the neighborhood planning initiatives in Forest Park Southeast. Each of the Old North partnerships was developed as a result of prior planning processes held by the neighborhood.

The partnership with RHCDA featured a formal agreement creating Old North Homes Inc., a for-profit entity. The agreement called for a four-member board, with two representatives from RHCDA (serving as president and vice president) and two members from the Old North St. Louis Restoration Group board. This step expanded the formal organizational capacity in the community yet linked it to the existing NGO. The agreement described financial and legal arrangements for the partnership; however, it did not clearly delineate roles, establish structures for decision-making or define spokespersons for the project.

RHCDA and the Restoration Group jointly developed a funding strategy, which led to partnerships with other agencies to solicit subsidies for affordable housing units. Along with providing the housing technical expertise of RHCDA, the partnership provided staff resources and accompanying strategic and financial planning services.

Though both organizations acknowledge the importance and power of the partnership, they also acknowledge that RHCDA has exercised more control over the development process. As the target date for groundbreaking approaches, both partners have expressed frustration with the pace of progress and the operating and communication styles of their respective partner. However, both partners do acknowledge that the plan remains consistent with the neighborhood's original priorities and that both are benefiting from the partnership experience.

The RHCDA/Old North partnership has included the involvement of resident board members and staff in all decisions. However, the difference in operating styles of the two organizations has created some recent tension. Both organizations voice frustration with the pace of progress and list challenges in setting meetings and identifying how final decisions will be made. Because of the need to meet funding and legal requirements, RHCDA tends to focus more on systems and more structured decision-making. Conversely, the Restoration Group is often

impatient with the multitude of structures and regulations and has traditionally built efforts on relationships rather than structure.

The partnership with the University of Missouri – St. Louis was much less formal, utilizing a set of steering and advisory committees to guide project design and implementation in the neighborhood. A full-time project manager position supports grant-related and other neighborhood initiatives and serves as a liaison between neighborhood residents and university faculty, staff and students. Capacity building experiences are also a key part of the Old North/university partnership, through training for potential board members and database and GIS mapping services in support of Restoration Group staff.

#### Involvement of Residents

Old North St. Louis residents were represented in both partnerships by the active involvement of the Restoration Group. All of the members of the board are residents, with the majority being homeowners in the neighborhood. As such, there were assurances that residents were involved in decisions of the partnership. Restoration Group board members have taken an active and aggressive role, ensuring that they were involved in all decisions, participating in planning and action teams, and monitoring progress. Because of their long history and cooperative working relationships, board members operate with a large degree of trust and mutual support.

However, some view the strengths of the Restoration Group board as a stable group as their primary weaknesses. Many of the board members have served for a majority of the organization's history, with limited turnover or changes in leadership. Created as an organization of homeowners in 1981, the board composition remains largely the same twenty years later. The Group's staff and board have made efforts in recent years to reach out and engage new residents in the organization and in neighborhood planning and project initiatives; however, the progress has been slow. As such, while the partnership process has effectively involved residents, those involved have not been representative of the entire community.

## Examination of Partnership Control Properties

### **1. Leadership**

The Old North St. Louis Restoration Group has played a significant leadership role in both of the partnerships in the Old North neighborhood. Because of the board's long history of working together, they operate with a great deal of trust, enabling them to make decisions quickly and consistently support those decisions after they are made. The structure of the partnership with RHCDA allows for equal representation by both organizations on the Old North Homes, Inc. board. While both partners acknowledge that the power and leadership is not "equal," it is clear that the neighborhood's influence is present and that the development plan remains consistent with the neighborhood's priorities. Because the university/community partnership involves fewer financial resources and is not as visible in the neighborhood, the leadership of initiatives has been of less concern, with projects coordinated jointly by staff from both partners and advisory or steering groups guiding the process.

### **2. Primary Funding**

In both partnerships in Old North St. Louis, similar to Forest Park Southeast, the institutional partners brought resources to the table, targeted for specific projects in the neighborhood. However, in Old North St. Louis, a portion of those resources has been funneled to the Restoration Group to enable them to hire their own staff and direct some of their own initiatives. In the housing development partnership, RHCDA and the Restoration Group are engaged jointly in raising additional funds to support construction costs and to provide additional assistance for affordable housing units.

### **3. Goals**

The partnership with RHCDA has established concrete goals for the housing development plan, including the construction of 130 single-family homes (North Market Place Affordable Home Initiative, 2002). The targets are a result of an original plan developed by the Restoration Group and adopted by the partnership as part of Old North Homes, Inc. The strategic planning process undertaken by the Restoration Group is also establishing long-term goals, allowing the Group to envision and plan for their future operation beyond the terms of the current partnerships.

The Old North/University partnership began with a set of goals and priorities defined in the HUD grant. Each project under the HUD grant is functioning with a community advisory or steering committee that is re-shaping the project and setting goals within the community context.

#### **4. Process**

Both partnerships in Old North St. Louis have benefited from a focus both on task and goal accomplishment and capacity building. Each initiative incorporates planning and skill-building opportunities for board members to gain skills to sustain the efforts. Because of the strong relationships among most of the Restoration Group board members, there is a high level of trust among the board. While the Restoration Group's board and staff have made strong efforts and maintained openness in working with institutional partners, some neighborhood residents have viewed them as insular and protective of their personal interests.

#### **ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION: LESSONS LEARNED**

In the Forest Park Southeast neighborhood, the emphasis largely has been on the product, with less attention to the process of building relationships or building internal capacity. As such, while tasks have been accomplished, community members have not necessarily assumed ownership for the accomplishment of those tasks or taken pride in the process. In addition, the neighborhood groups have not had the opportunity to develop the capacity to accomplish similar projects on their own.

The Old North St. Louis neighborhood has spent many years in relationship building. As the neighborhood organization worked with external partners, staff and board members began to expand their capacity to manage projects and accomplish larger development projects. While optimism remains high, some neighborhood residents are beginning to express frustration with the process and express a need for visible signs of achievement.

The Forest Park Southeast Housing Corporation is essentially the same organization today that it was 8 years ago. It does not have additional organizational capacity; it does not have the

ability to develop additional social capital in the community. The Forest Park Southeast neighborhood has, however, seen considerable capital investment. The Housing Corporation has been involved in the planning of this investment. But involvement is not empowerment. There has been no investment in developing the organizational capacity of the Housing Corporation. It operates in a community with a very dense organizational infrastructure. If the Housing Corporation withdrew from the development process, the institutional partner has a vested interest in the physical condition of the community and would likely switch to another partner, albeit one with even less organizational capacity.

The Old North St. Louis Restoration Group is a very different organization today than it was a few years ago. It has expanded its organizational capacity and it is directly responsible for developing social capital among neighborhood residents. The Restoration Group operates in a community where it has no competitors for the affiliation of residents. If the Restoration Group closed its doors, its partners would have no alternative organizational link to the community.

The partnership arrangements in the Forest Park Southeast and Old North St. Louis neighborhoods represent an array of challenges that are likely to be typical of community/institutional partnerships. Among the challenges present in the partnerships examined are the following:

- ***Power dynamics.*** Bringing together institutions and neighborhoods that have very different cultures and access to resources can present significant challenges to the partnership process. (Fulbright-Anderson, et al, 2001) It is often difficult for neighborhood organizations to sit at the table with large, resource rich institutions. The situation is aggravated when funding to support the partnership is controlled by or is provided solely to the institution, as was the case in both neighborhoods.
- ***Representing neighborhood residents.*** Can institutional partners deal with one neighborhood entity and assume that it represents the interests of all

neighborhood residents? Institutions may seek out a single organization that can speak for the neighborhood, but there are often multiple entities, or an entity that is not entirely representative of the diversity of the population.

- ***Institutional attitudes.*** Institutions may view neighborhood organization as clients or may approach the neighborhood from a “missionary” or expert perspective, wanting to share their expertise and teach the neighborhood how to do things.
- ***Professional staff capacity.*** The ability of institutional staff to understand how to work with neighborhoods, or the ability of neighborhood staff to work with institutions may vary greatly. Staff plays a central brokering role among members of the partnership, along with other organizations, funders and local governments. They must be skilled in communicating effectively and balancing the expectations of each. Neighborhood organizations and board involved in projects must also determine when to allow their staff to make decisions on behalf of the organization and when to engage larger groups of residents.
- ***Fear of losing control.*** In order to develop a true partnership with a neighborhood organization, the institution must be willing to give up some total control and be open to the priorities of the neighborhood. Neighborhood organizations that are seeking resources from external partners also face the challenge of giving up total control, particularly in the case of physical development projects.
- ***Timetables.*** Partnerships involve a number of people and organizations that are typically not on the same timetable. Neighborhoods may have a different viewpoint of the time needed to implement a project, or the urgency for completion, than do their institutional partners. Often, the slow pace of moving through a bureaucracy can be frustrating to neighborhood residents. Conversely, neighborhoods may not have the staff resources to complete reports or implement initiatives on the institution’s schedule.
- ***History.*** Partnerships may suffer from prior negative experiences between the organizations, with members unable or unwilling to forget about the past.

Residents may also associate government partners with past government programs that had a negative impact on the neighborhood.

- ***Understanding the culture: systems versus relationship orientation.*** Neighborhood residents typically view problems and needs differently than institutional representatives. Institutions may focus on structures for planning, flowcharts for implementation or legal regulations, while residents may be more interested in who will be positively or negatively impacted by the action. In both neighborhoods examined in this study, tension arose around physical development decisions, with the institution focused on its knowledge of new resident expectations, while neighborhoods focused on their first-hand knowledge of existing owners of the property and their personal situation.

The differences between these two community development projects are on the dimensions of the level of physical development compared to the level of resident development. Physical development can include not only new housing and commercial district revitalization, but also social service infrastructure such as health clinics, day care centers, and schools. Resident development must include the capacity for self-direction in the change that occurs in the physical community. As shown in Table 2 Forest Park Southeast and Old North St. Louis developed very differently on these two dimensions.

Table 2  
Development Matrix

	<b>Forest Park Southeast</b>	<b>Old North St. Louis</b>
<b>Physical community</b>	Substantial development	modest development
<b>Resident community</b>	modest development	substantial development

The goal of a successful and sustained community development initiative would be to have substantial development in both the physical community and the resident community. The research

conducted for these case studies in St. Louis indicates it is a daunting challenge to achieve such a balance in distressed urban communities.

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