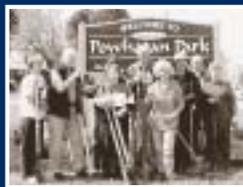




LEARNING FROM NEIGHBORHOODS.....THE STORY OF
THE HAMPTON
NEIGHBORHOOD
INITIATIVE, 1993-2003

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imagine

IMAGINE THE FIRST ACT OF A DISHEARTENING SCRIPT THAT HAS PLAYED OUT IN MANY CITIES OVER A PERIOD OF DECADES: CITY GOVERNMENT ACTS UNILATERALLY AND ARROGANTLY IN NEIGHBORHOODS. Citizen leaders organize to block city initiatives they think have not been thought through. City government tries again, this time with superficial citizen involvement. Neighborhood leaders see through the ruse. City officials, frustrated by citizens opposing them, continue doing their work the same way, with attitude. Neighborhood organizations, home to cynics who like fighting City Hall, stagnate. Neighborhoods decline.

Usually, the next act begins under the title: “City leaders organize a neighborhood initiative.” In most cases, citizens react as they have so many times in the past: What is the city trying to foist on us now?

What does a city that does not want to repeat this script do?

How can City Hall change so citizens want to work with it?

How do neighborhood leaders accustomed to fighting city-driven initiatives begin to trust City Hall and choose to form partnerships — with the city, other neighborhoods and other agencies?

It’s not easy. But one of the oldest cities in the United States — **HAMPTON, VIRGINIA** — is in the midst of decade-long renaissance that has transformed the way citizens, city hall, schools and community-based organizations come together to improve their neighborhoods...



In Hampton, one person who understood the first act of this script well was Andy Bigelow. He had been involved with his neighborhood organization and was part of an umbrella group known as the Hampton Federation of Civic Associations. And he knew how the city worked — City Hall proposed, neighborhood leaders opposed. So he reacted the way many citizens did — by fighting plans, fighting proposals and demanding change.



But Bigelow was tiring of always playing defense against City Hall. He realized that many neighborhood organizations existed, at least in part, to fight proposals by developers and the city. And, despite the time and effort he and others were putting in to sustain their organizations, not only did little seem to

change, some neighborhoods clearly were headed downward.

Bigelow looked cynically at the 1993 announcement of the city's new Neighborhoods Initiative. The typical questions filled his mind: Was the city's stated intention to collaborate with neighborhoods just another way to control them? Was "collaboration" another name for superficial citizen involvement? Would this effort be another passing fad, raising the expectations of citizens but disappearing after the next election? Was this another level of bureaucracy separating citizens from the departments that delivered services to them?

Another protagonist was Joan Kennedy, a longtime city employee who served as city planning director before her appointment as the first director of Hampton's Neighborhood Office in 1993. A former VISTA volunteer, Kennedy cared deeply about Hampton's neighborhoods and had done her best to do what she thought was right for them. The author of plans that residents had vehemently opposed, Kennedy was frustrated, too. Her experience in planning had not prepared her for the conflict resolution and community building the city seemed to need.

Kennedy observed that she had been most successful when she took the time to forge relationships with

community leaders. When a strong rapport between city officials and the neighborhoods existed, she found that all sides could work through tough issues and take action. As director of the new Neighborhood Office, she believed that building relationships with longtime citizen leaders and adversaries, such as Bigelow, was a critical foundation for success.

One of the Neighborhood Office's first programs was a "Neighborhood College," a several month long training program for citizens. The goals of Neighborhood College were ambitious: to teach citizens about city government, to explain the neighborhood initiative, to build partnership skills, and, most importantly, to transform the relationships with citizens by having city staff both teach and participate in the effort.

Kennedy encouraged Bigelow to attend the city's first Neighborhood College, and he went, with eyes wide open.

"I was still not a believer," Bigelow said. "I could still see what was wrong with the initiative, as well as what I thought could be done better."

Through the first few of several sessions, he continued to think the initiative's goals were unobtainable. But as he learned more about the city's new approach to neighborhoods and pondered it, his attitude

began to change. Maybe there was something to it.

Attending Neighborhood College “made you sit and think that maybe other things could happen in our neighborhoods, that maybe relationships could be different,” he said. “I found it to be a mind-broadening experience, and thought, maybe I have to start thinking outside of the box I’m used to.”

Bigelow decided to give the new neighborhood initiative a chance and began to participate, as a partner.

If Bigelow were a lone convert, this story would be a short one. But he’s not. Throughout Hampton are scores of neighborhood leaders who have participated in the Neighborhoods Initiative and have undergone similar transitions in their thinking.

“I thought it was eyewash,” said Andre McCloud, a resident of the Greater Wythe neighborhood who now serves on the Neighborhood Commission. “It was only after I went that I realized how much I did not know about the city. It really opened my eyes.”

In time, Bigelow and McCloud would become two of the initiative’s most ardent supporters. Today, 10 years later, Bigelow sees a changed climate in Hampton.

“As neighborhood leaders, we’re talking with city officials, we’re

working with City Hall, and we’re accomplishing our goals throughout the city,” he said. “We see that we can approach issues positively and get things done, and I think most civic group leaders who have worked with the initiative would tell you that.”

Neighborhood leaders are not the only ones who have changed. While the popular press touts corporate transformations from GE to IBM, similar efforts within public sector organizations often are overlooked. In Hampton, that change is profound. Not only have staff throughout government changed their attitudes and enhanced their ability to work with neighborhoods, they have changed the way the organization works to foster sustained collaborative efforts with communities.

The initiative’s successes are tangible: a community center functioning in a long-shuttered school, a museum celebrating the history of the only resettlement community in the United States designed and constructed by African-Americans; a learning center in a former bar; neighborhoods stabilized and on the rise.

Neighborhoods have achieved their goals by mustering resources they would not have been able to access without collaborating with the city. From the city’s perspective, the initia-

tive has helped to identify neighborhood needs and priorities and allocate limited resources that are not only responsive to neighborhood priorities, but leverage resources from citizens, community based organizations, schools, businesses and other partners.

The successes are intangible, too: new and rich networks of citizens and city officials who know and trust one another and are willing to work together when a crisis arises.

In this document, we tell the stories of Hampton’s Neighborhoods Initiative during its first 10 years, the elements upon which the initiative is built, and the lessons that the city and neighborhoods have learned during this innovative experiment in civic involvement. But the story is far from over.

In the final analysis, perhaps the most important lesson is that Hampton is still changing, still improving, still learning. The effort to improve neighborhoods has evolved constantly, in the community as well as within local government. And the evolution is not done, as neighborhood leaders in Hampton continue to address an evolving set of challenges.

Although the goal of building

relationships has been realized, the work of building relationships and reaching out in new ways is never done.

Act three is just beginning. ■

*“As neighborhood leaders,
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throughout the city...”*

—ANDY BIGELOW

HAMPTON ROADS REGION



bors and City Hall. Said Jim Dick, a neighborhood representative to the consensus committee, “When the process was initiated, it was a kind of us-against-them mentality. You could see it on both sides. Once everyone started recognizing each other as individuals, we could discuss issues and deal with them.”

Linda McNeely, another participant who was later elected to City Council, concluded: “The biggest thing I got out of the consensus group was that the city government and staff were not the enemy.”

The success with the consensus-based conflict resolution process inspired the initial paradigm shift in planning processes in Hampton. Senior staff from throughout city government were trained in facilitation skills; the planning department began to involve citizens in neighborhood planning; and, despite a subsequent stumble on an effort that sought consensus on solid waste issues, this type of participatory process was growing legs.

About the same time, another set of activities received federal funding. In 1990, the US Department of Health and Human Services Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (CSAP), which had been making important investments in communities during the late 1980s and early ‘90s, funded a

project in Hampton. Starting life as the Families and Youth At-Risk Initiating Committee, the Hampton Coalition for Youth (as it became

known) grew into an important springboard for neighborhood action.

The broad-based coalition, which sought to improve opportunities for youth and decrease risky behavior, engaged adults, youth, nonprofits, the faith community, and city leaders in a multi-year learning, planning and action process. Their work was inspired by an emerging national youth

development field that focused on creating healthy environments that support youth.

Coalition leaders took to heart a simple but profound statement from the Search Institute, a leader in the field of youth development: “Communities do make a difference in the lives of youth. And many of the contributing factors are within a community’s control.”⁴

The coalition’s work culminated in a 1993 report to the mayor, which included a “Neighborhood Initiatives Program” as one of four major recommendations. The report framed many of the principles that ultimately shaped Hampton’s neighborhood

initiative: a commitment to involving youth, an asset-based approach, and a recognition that schools served as the center of most neighborhoods.

Meanwhile, Hampton’s government was being reinvented, one stultifying bureaucratic process after another. City Manager Bob O’Neill, with the support of Mayor Eason and the Hampton City Council, believed that “the fundamental transformation of public systems and organizations to create dramatic increases in their effectiveness, efficiency, adaptability, and capacity to innovate” was not only possible, they were going to make it happen in their own backyard.⁵

“Luckily for us, Hampton has been blessed with city managers and councils that encouraged experimentation,” Monteith said. “The city manager was not happy unless the staff was re-creating the wheel every day. We had a corporate expectation to push the envelope, and that helped us significantly.”

One of the tenets of the reinventing government movement was the recognition that ‘one size does not fit all,’ a principle that would underlie Hampton’s neighborhood efforts. Federal policies that treated all cities in the same manner no longer were viewed as effective. City government policies that addressed all



neighborhoods in the same way were not effective either. A city council that built community centers in every neighborhood, for example, without first asking the neighborhoods whether this was important to them would not be making the best investment of public resources.

While national recognition was still over the horizon, efforts that had started in the late 1980s were already taking hold. Like many cities that were reinventing themselves, Hampton officials debated their vision statement for almost a year, culminating with one that is simple and bold: “To be the most livable city in Virginia.” ■

It is against this backdrop that, in 1993, the mayor declared in his state of the city address that neighborhoods would be one of the city's four most important priorities. But priorities do not make a program, and city leaders were bucking the same national trends that were challenging other communities. City decision-makers had recognized a shift in decision-making from the national, state and local scales to the global, regional and neighborhood arenas. If Hampton were to prosper, under this line of thinking, neighborhoods had to be empowered to identify their own agendas and carry them out.

Moreover, the leadership structure in many American cities had been changing from top-down to bottom-up. No longer were cities dominated by one or more corporations that determined the course of city politics and ensured that local needs were met. As the relative power and influence of these corporations waned, a vacuum was created and neighborhoods were "not prepared to make decisions, so the city had to do something to help them get prepared," Eason said.

These factors, coupled with a potentially dire housing and employment outlook, made it clear to city officials that, despite their best efforts to reinvent city govern-

ment, Hampton *did not* and *would not* have all of the resources it needed to meet the needs of its neighborhoods without working with them. To create the kind of city that citizens wanted, city government would have to collaborate with the citizens to set priorities and determine how best to fulfill each neighborhood's (and, by extension, the city's) most pressing needs.

As city leaders tried to accomplish this goal, however, it became clear that they did not know what the neighborhoods' priorities were, much less which citizens were willing to partner. Not only did city government lack an effective system for working with neighborhoods, the neighborhoods themselves were not organized in a way that ensured their leaders truly were representing the people within their borders. City staff did not discover the second problem until they tried to deal with the first.

"What was clear up front was that the city was never going to have the resources necessary to meet all neighborhood needs unless we got into an active partnership with neighborhoods," said Bob O'Neill, who left Hampton in 1997 and now serves as executive director of the International City/County Management Association in Washington D.C. "And even if our resources were not limited, we were

still missing neighborhood priorities, so we also had to build community leadership to discover them."

To identify neighborhood priorities, new lines of communication between city government and neighborhoods, and leadership and collaboration within neighborhoods would need to be created and fostered. As these needs became clearer, the concept of a neighborhood initiative began to take form.

Fortunately, Hampton was well positioned to move ahead. To many in Hampton, collaborating with neighborhoods seemed like a natural step. In some older neighborhoods, Hampton residents traditionally had identified with their neighborhoods and carried a strong sense of neighborhood pride. The City Council had reinforced these feelings over the years through policies aimed at strengthening and supporting neighborhoods.

Several key staff, including Joan Kennedy, Mike Monteith, and Cindy Carlson from the Hampton Coalition for Youth, worked together to develop a description of the Department of Neighborhood Services. ■

FRAMING THE INITIATIVE



NEIGHBORHOODS
LINE UP
AS OFFICE
OPENS



To move the idea forward, City Manager Bob O'Neill appointed a committee (known as the "initiating committee") to design the process of working with neighborhoods and identify members of the public who would serve on a steering committee, which would take on the task of determining how to structure the initiative. At the same time, the City Council established the Department of Neighborhood Services (soon renamed the Neighborhood Office), staffed by Joan Kennedy and three neighborhood facilitators.

The Neighborhood Office's initial work plan was straightforward. Staff would spend the first year working with the steering committee to design the neighborhood initiative and figure out what the office was going to do. They would develop an organizational structure, gather information about neighborhoods, launch some initial programs, monitor how well the programs were being carried out, and develop some early "lessons learned" that could be applied to the program's design. If all went well, in the second year, the office would be prepared to develop a set of three neighborhood plans, then continue on a schedule to draft three plans each year until every neighborhood in Hampton had one.

At least that was the idea. But as soon as the office opened, a line began forming at the door.

Many neighborhood leaders were eager to be served, so many, in fact, that Kennedy and her staff decided to change their approach. Each neighborhood that came in became a pilot, so residents would not have to wait for services as the city developed the program design. This provided the Neighborhood Office with "laboratories" where they could apply the ideas that staff and the steering committee were developing on their own as well as gathering from other communities.

"We didn't say 'no' to any neighborhood," Kennedy said. "Our original plan was to be very structured, but that was when we didn't know anything about neighborhood work. This is a very messy business and you have to be very flexible."

The office began working with eight pilot neighborhoods — Aberdeen Gardens, Park Place, Old North Hampton, North Back River, Eason Park, Wythe, Wythe-Phenix and Newtown — and from these early efforts, staff developed a set of observations that were contrary to some of the commonly held assumptions about neighborhoods. It was these lessons, much more than national research, that determined the final design of the neighborhood initiative:

- Many neighborhoods that appear visually or statistically most distressed often have the richest human assets; their residents have a long history of taking care of one another.
- People will invest themselves in their neighborhoods, some at great inconvenience and some despite great fear.
- People do not always blame others for neighborhood problems or claim others should do all the work. They commonly look to themselves and their neighbors to make things better and seek to enlist the support of the police, the churches, the schools and the city in their efforts.
- When asked open-ended questions about life in neighborhoods, people talk first about safety, a sense of community, youth, jobs and good housing. Many of these concerns are highly symbolic and can be addressed readily with existing resources.
- When they talk about safety, many people in fact are asking for a different relationship with their police officer. They want someone they know, someone who will be part of making their neighborhood safer, someone they can reach out to.

CITY OF HAMPTON NEIGHBORHOOD DISTRICTS



- Many neighborhoods understand and desire the concept of 'partnership.' The greater challenge to them is changing the mindset of government.

These observations became the assumptions upon which the initiative was built and provided a context that distinguished Hampton's approach. ■

GUIDING
PRINCIPLES

As they moved ahead on the design, city staff and the steering committee asked themselves many questions, trying to look at the problem from every angle: How do we define a neighborhood? Which neighborhoods should participate first? How does city government prepare neighborhoods to participate in this process? How do we develop partnerships? How do we focus on youth? What is the best way to take a holistic approach to the idea of

neighborhood “health”?

After a year of study and experience of working with neighborhoods, the steering committee, with input from the Neighborhood Office, concluded that the initiative would have the best chance to succeed if it had a clear philosophy or set of values that articulated a new vision of neighborhoods and the human, physical and intangible resources within them.

The committee envisioned a city

“where individuals and families, by creating healthy neighborhoods, have the opportunity to succeed in realizing their full potential for a better quality of life.” The committee was especially adamant that the initiative would be about creating “opportunities,” not “doing to or for” neighborhoods. Instead, the vision would be realized by acting on a set of principles that would underlie the entire initiative: ▶



PARTNERSHIP

By supporting partnerships among neighborhoods, schools, businesses, community institutions and government, the city could help to provide neighborhoods with resources that could make a difference but not provide all the resources itself. The idea was to maximize the ability of neighborhoods to help themselves and minimize the use of experts from outside the neighborhoods.

This type of partnership would require a new type of relationship between neighborhoods and the city, based on a willingness of both city government and neighborhoods to collaborate. City government would have to be willing to enter into long-term relationships with neighborhoods and not be tempted to try quick fixes. Neighborhoods, meanwhile, would have to avoid reverting to the old model of “we complain and the city should deliver.”



INCLUSIVENESS

Every neighborhood should have an opportunity to participate in the initiative. Similarly, all citizens and other stakeholders should be invited to participate in any activity related to the initiative.

Inclusiveness was important for a very practical reason. If the city were to enter into partnerships with neighborhoods and carry out changes in physical or social structures, then the city had a responsibility to ensure that the partnerships were genuine, and that neighborhood representation was not limited to a vocal few. This principle would be applied citywide (by including all neighborhoods) and within neighborhoods themselves (by offering the opportunity to everyone who would be affected by decisions in the decision making process).

COMPREHENSIVENESS

A neighborhood's quality of life is not limited to bricks and mortar. Thus, neighborhood efforts should not be limited to physical improvements. A healthy neighborhood feels safe and supports the needs of its residents for social interaction, recreation, education, civic involvement and access to goods and services.



A FOCUS ON YOUTH AND FAMILIES

Traditionally in Hampton, youth and families had been viewed as separate from neighborhoods, schools and local government. Services and resources had been targeted narrowly, most often in response to crises. But strengthening and supporting youth and families should happen where people live.

Neighborhoods, therefore, would be viewed as resources for families. This “youth focus” would not be something done *for* youth. Rather, youth would be involved in designing and carrying out the programs and opportunities that would be available to them.

RECOGNIZING UNIQUENESS

Only a neighborhood can define what makes it healthy. Therefore, the initiative would attempt to appreciate the culture, heritage, character, assets and aspirations of every neighborhood in the city.

*...strengthening
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BUILDING ON STRENGTHS

In the past, city government had focused on problems, because, by identifying problems, the city could intervene, which brought money and attention to neighborhoods. But through this process, the city effectively had taught neighborhoods to value their problems.

Instead of focusing on what neighborhoods did *not* have or could *not* do, the initiative would focus on the ability and capacity of neighborhoods to shape their own futures, in the concept the city called “asset orientation,” or viewing residents and neighborhoods as producers, not consumers. These “assets” include the skills, gifts, knowledge, energy, resources and values that citizens bring to their neighborhoods, both individually and collectively. Through the initiative, the city would tap these assets to fill gaps it could not address with city resources.

PLANNING WITH ACTION

Because neighborhood planning can be a long and complex process, citizens looking for quick action can become frustrated. To balance the need to be deliberative about complex and expensive issues yet show some immediate progress,



planning efforts would include short-term actions that everyone could readily agree to, on issues where the resources were readily available, such as neighborhood cleanups, or neighborhood signs.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Because the initiative would rely on the strengths and abilities of citizens to identify priorities and help to carry out plans, developing leadership would be critical to its success. Several programs or “building blocks” would be created to develop neighborhood leadership and strengthen their skill set.

LISTENING

Finally, for the initiative to succeed, city officials and neighborhood leaders would have to listen to one another and encourage respect for diverse ideas — a philosophical shift for two groups that were more accustomed to telling each other what to do. ■



Rhetoric, as citizens know, only goes so far. The emerging philosophy of the initiative had all the right words, but the real test would be in the actions. After working with the pilot neighborhoods, articulating lessons, and beginning to reorganize internally, city officials realized they had raised expectations and needed to deliver a comprehensive approach. They also had a strong sense of what was needed, given their analysis, the early lessons, and, most importantly, from listening to citizens.

The underlying framework was straightforward – share leadership of the initiative with neighborhood leaders and institutional stakeholders, build individual and organizational capacity in neighborhoods and city government, catalyze numerous small neighborhood improvements, and develop citizen-driven neighborhood plans to define visions and goals and significant actions – ownership, capacity, and actions based on plans.

Undergirding this framework was



a core belief that Joan Kennedy frequently asserts. Especially today, a community has only so much energy to work on community improvement, she said. People in a community often spend their time fighting or backbiting or working on unrelated projects that do not support each other. Synergy is found, she suggests, when a community has people

working together on efforts and strategies that support each other. This commonsense approach can be found throughout Hampton's efforts.■

BUILDING
THE INITIATIVE
BEYOND
THE PRINCIPLES

SHARING LEADERSHIP:
THE NEIGHBORHOOD
COMMISSION

In the earliest years, the Neighborhood Initiative was a staff-driven enterprise. Staff listened, staff consulted, staff engaged, but ultimately staff decided. Yet the program's philosophy articulated a goal of partnership. That goal was easier to implement on the neighborhood level using existing structures, by creating *ad hoc* processes that brought together potential partners. At the citywide level, a forum for regular conversation and deliberation among partners did not exist.

The architects of the initiative decided it was essential to build a citywide body that brought together neighborhood leaders and other stakeholders to guide the neighborhood initiative. In Hampton, those bodies are called commissions and thus, the Neighborhood Commission was born.

*...it was essential
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The Neighborhood Commission provides leadership, policy guidance and support to the Neighborhood Initiative. While it is now seen as critical to the initiative, it was not always that way. As the commission began to do its work, questions arose about its role, how it related to other organizations, and whether it was



organized properly. Commissioners did not understand what they were supposed to do and spent a lot of time setting policy and approving Neighborhood Development Fund projects. They also had trouble understanding how their work related to the ongoing work of two other groups, the Neighborhood Task Force and the Neighborhood College Alumni Association, the first made up of city officials, the second of residents. With so much on their plate, the commission was not completely effective, and after a time, they decided to reinvent themselves.

During the reinvention process, they wrestled with core questions. Did they effectively function like a board of directors for a nonprofit organization, setting policy direction for staff, or were they more like a board advising City Council, doling

out neighborhood development grants? Did they need to be representative of every neighborhood, or only of neighborhood perspectives? Some of the commission's most difficult meetings occurred during this time.

The conversation led to the delineation of 10 neighborhood districts, covering every part of the city. Representatives were to be elected from each district through a neighborhood-based process. These are the first ten members of the commission. Three representatives of the city — currently an assistant city manager, the director of public works, and the public communications officer — join them. In addition, three institutional representatives are on the commission, representing business, nonprofits and the faith community. As a part of the city's commitment to involving youth directly in decision-



making, two youth representatives also serve. Three representatives from the schools round out the 21-member body.

Today the commission functions like a non-profit board of directors, providing policy guidance to the initiative, establishing the direction and making decisions. Meeting monthly, members typically organize around the goals and objectives set out in the city's strategic plan. Most of their work takes place in committee, where they gather,

sometimes once a week, to examine issues related to youth, capacity building and marketing the program, among other issue areas identified in the strategic plan.

Like the initiative itself, the commission struggles with questions of outreach and involvement. As Andy Bigelow, who serves on the commission, says, "The commission still struggles to get citizens and organizations involved in the initiative. We are still stymied, we have not been able to break through to get folks

interested in doing things in neighborhoods. It's almost like we're relegated to deal with the few folks who want to engage us. But this ebbs and flows. Our relationship with one organization will get better, then the people involved will disappear and we'll start over again. We're still struggling to find a way to work with that problem, but I think we're making inroads and are being more accepted for what we are."

While the commission has been challenged with connecting with citizens who are not on the commission, it has played an essential role in building partnerships among commissioners, as well as creating stronger connections with the schools, city government and non-profits agencies at a citywide level, around work in specific neighborhoods, a task that was very difficult prior to its creation. ■

NEIGHBORHOOD COMMISSION

DISTRICT REPRESENTATIVES 10

CITY REPRESENTATIVES 3

INSTITUTIONAL REPRESENTATIVES 3

SCHOOL REPRESENTATIVES 3

YOUTH REPRESENTATIVES 2

TOTAL NEIGHBORHOOD COMMISSION MEMBERS . . 21