

BUILDING
NEIGHBORHOOD
CAPACITY:
SEND 'EM
TO COLLEGE

The initiative's first challenge was to embrace neighborhoods as partners. "But when we first started out, we had no idea of how to do it," Joan Kennedy explained. "Nobody knew anybody else, and some residents viewed city employees as heartless bureaucrats instead of the 'average human beings' that most of us are ... We also needed to unravel the layers of mistrust toward city government that had built up over the years."

This lesson was brought home to Kennedy during a conversation she had with a citizen while still serving as planning director. It happened while she was staffing a consensus building committee working on an east-west parkway. During the heat of the controversy, a man who was serving on the committee saw her at his church, which, coincidentally, was the same church she attended. So surprised was he to see her in a place of worship that he told her, "I didn't know you went to church!" He expressed even greater shock upon discovering that she had children. Apparently, some citizens did not believe city workers had regular lives outside the office.

Many more residents would need to have this kind of epiphany if the initiative were to succeed to evoke the sea change in thinking that the city was seeking. But how could the city

create an environment where this would happen?

As the importance of this question began to sharpen in their minds, staff members from the Neighborhood Office were making another discovery. They found that many citizens understood the concept of partnership, but few really understood how the city was applying the idea in the initiative. Despite early outreach efforts, many citizens continued to view city government as the provider of services and neighborhoods as the recipients.



Changing this mindset would require that the relationship between neighborhoods and city government change as well. In an attempt to do

this, Kennedy and others created Neighborhood College, an intense, multi-session program taught by city officials as a kind of City Government 101, a school for neighborhood leaders.

The program was built on the assumption that citizens distrusted government at least in part because they did not understand what city government did. Neighborhood College would try to bridge this gap by giving neighborhood leaders an insider's view of the city. At its core, the program was an opportunity for city staff and neighborhood leaders to build relationships with one another across organizational lines in a non-contentious setting.

In one session, dubbed Budget 101, participants learned about city revenues – where the money came from, where it was spent, how little discretionary income the city really had, and why expanding the commercial tax base improved the city's financial health. Another session focused on economic strategies. A third examined land use. A fourth looked at the connections between youth, neighborhoods and schools. Mixed in were tours of City Hall and neighborhoods.

"Through Neighborhood College, you get a better understanding on what it takes to run a city and you get

to know (city) staff people,” said Andy Bigelow. “You get some idea about what (city officials) really want to do, and what they’re trying to do.”

Sitting side by side at the weekly sessions, residents and city officials began to forge personal relationships with one another. No longer were the city manager, planning director and other city officials viewed as people who just attended public meetings every Tuesday night.

As time went on, this helped some of the barriers that separated the public and the government to disappear. “The citizens got to know us as people, and we found that there’s a lot of mileage in that,” Kennedy said.

Inside city government, the experience of Neighborhood College led some officials to realize that they had no idea what was going on in some neighborhoods. Talking directly with residents helped to open lines of communication that did not exist before. These conversations helped officials look at neighborhoods through the citizens’ own eyes.

One Parks Department employee who attended Neighborhood College remarked that after completing the course she began to see neighborhoods as more than the trees and grass for which she was responsible. She could see them in terms of what the people who lived there wanted

them to be. Other staff members had similar experiences.

Fifteen neighborhood leaders and five city employees attended the first class in the spring of 1995. Recognizing the value of the connections the program yielded, the city soon established a Neighborhood College Alumni Association to provide a medium for graduates to spread the word about the benefits of the college.

The strategy worked. The second Neighborhood College attracted 25 people and cemented a program that would serve as one of the initiative’s building blocks. More than 323 graduates (as of early 2003) and the alumni association now actively contribute to community affairs.

The Aberdeen Gardens neighborhood, in particular, has made attending Neighborhood College a priority. “Most of my (committee) chairs are graduates,” said Roosevelt Wilson, president of the Aberdeen Gardens Historic and Civic Association. “I think it’s a wonderful program.”

It may be old-fashioned civic pride, but it works. Stephanie Taylor, another graduate, described what she gained: “I now know how to implement positive change in my neighborhood and where to go to access



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resources through the city. I have a new pride in the city by virtue of knowing what’s been done, and what is being done to make Hampton a better place to live.”

Neighborhood College has provided the city a medium to provide better and more complete information to residents, as well as access to city leaders. These factors, over time, have helped to improve the public perception of city government and bolster the credibility of the initiative. ■

FOCUSING
CITY GOVERNMENT
ON
NEIGHBORHOODS



Building trust goes beyond building relationships, however. By acting as a partner with neighborhoods, the Neighborhood Office had raised the bar for all city departments by raising the public's expectations. Although this was a giant step forward, Neighborhood Office staff feared the growing goodwill would only continue if neighborhoods had positive interactions with all city departments. This was especially important because in most cases these other departments (and not the Neighborhood Office) possessed the resources that neighborhoods most wanted.

It was one thing for the city to say that Hampton had changed the way it worked with neighborhoods, but what if residents approached a city department to act collaboratively only to be rebuffed? Even one bad experience could undo some of the momentum the initiative had created. For the initiative to be successful, all city departments would need to change the way they did business and devise a way to provide their services on a neighborhood basis.

In the past, citizens who had sought city services were not always greeted warmly. After all, some bureaucrats had reasoned, wasn't it the job of city government to meet the broad policy goals set by elected officials and not

become mired in the single-issue politics of local complainers?

"Neighborhood organizations and leaders tended to be viewed as a nuisance, always telling the city what to do and diverting us from doing what we thought was best," Joan Kennedy said.

"Our first message was internal to city government, namely, that we needed to view neighborhoods as a strategic issue and neighborhood leaders as resources and partners instead of complaining adversaries," Kennedy said, and to do this, alignment from the top was needed.

One of the initiative's primary internal issues was allocating city resources. To change how the city did business – to provide what the initiative leaders were calling 'neighborhood-based service delivery,' or allocating resources on a neighborhood basis – better communication among city departments was required and a new approach to allocating resources between city departments and the neighborhoods themselves was needed.

To address these issues, city manager Bob O'Neill assigned the heads of the departments with the resources most in demand by neighborhoods to a Neighborhood Task Force. After studying the issue, the task force concluded that the city's

relationship with neighborhoods was hampered by systems that worked well for city government but not as well for neighborhoods. If Hampton really were serious about changing its relationship with neighborhoods, these systems would have to change.

The means to better neighborhood service delivery took the form of area improvement teams. The first, established in Aberdeen Gardens, was comprised of officials from several city departments who worked with neighborhood groups on specific projects to improve the neighborhood's quality of life.



The team was directed to think less about the departments they worked in and more about what had to be done to improve neighborhoods. The idea also was to provide opportunities for the neighborhood to help itself.

The area team concept worked well in Aberdeen, a cohesive African-American neighborhood in central



ABERDEEN MUSEUM • BEFORE



ABERDEEN MUSEUM • AFTER

Hampton where some homes had been in the same families since the 1930s. This neighborhood had resources the area team could draw upon: residents hosted meetings of the area team in their homes, and several contractors who had the ability to complete public improvements lived in the neighborhood.

However, when the task force tried to form a team in each of Hampton's 10 newly created neighborhood districts (defined by another Neighborhood Office project), the concept was not as successful. By applying the same idea throughout the city, the initiative went against the reinventing government principle of 'one size does not fit all,' and the approach did not work well. Moreover, as Kennedy said, "we had the capacity to be extremely responsive to one area, but not to the whole city at one time." The resources that existed in

Aberdeen did not exist to the same degree in other neighborhoods.

After a few years of stops and starts, the city decided to establish area teams only after a neighborhood completed a plan or was seeking services best served by that model; in effect, the area teams morphed into implementation teams that would help to carry out the plan.

Today, area teams are tailored to the issues that a community is trying to address; instead of a standard membership, teams are made up of city staff who control the resources the projects require.

The notion of the Neighborhood Task Force and the area teams bridged some of the competing concepts within the reinventing government movement. Initially focused on the idea of "citizen as customer," proponents of reinvention had urged local governments to create seamless, one-stop connections to their customers.

If Hampton's area teams had only organized themselves to deliver services better, they would have violated the "partnership" principle of the neighborhood initiative (itself a manifestation of the reinventing government movement), because they would have been acting independently of the neighborhoods.

By working with citizens collectively and fashioning a service delivery strategy that is driven by the community, the city is effectively collaborating with the community to achieve shared goals – a dramatic change from separate agencies with separate plans working on different timelines that was in place before the initiative began.

Once the program was off the ground, the issue of internal 'alignment' became a central challenge. Although the efforts made by the Neighborhood Task Force were "the spark that created a new way of working in the city government," according to assistant city manager Mike Monteith, the challenge remains. Some departments have bought into the community involvement process and have devised creative ways to involve the public in decision making, while others are not as comfortable with the approach, he said.

"Today, we still have departments

that don't understand community participation," Monteith said. "And we still hear from sectors of the community who complain that the old way of doing business is still alive, but we are getting there."

To accomplish the initiative's broader goals, the city and its neighborhoods would have to learn how to work together. This would be a two-fold learning process. At the beginning, the city could not collaborate with neighborhoods because it did not know what the neighborhoods' priorities were. However, even if all sides were willing, nobody knew exactly how to proceed. To be successful, the initiative would have to address both aspects.

"In true collaboration, the city brings what it knows to the table and the neighborhood brings what it knows, and we make something better than what either could do alone," Kennedy said. ■

FOCUS FIRST ON
CAPACITY BUILDING,
THEN DO MORE



The internal capacity issues that the Neighborhood Task Force was grappling with had an external analog: neighborhood capacity, or the ability of neighborhoods to muster the resources needed to carry out their goals.

In the early days of the initiative, Neighborhood Office staff struggled to define capacity and what it looked like. Soon it became clear, however, that capacity, in whatever form it was taking, was weak across the city, a finding that became a driving force behind the city's decision to launch programs such as Neighborhood College.

Building capacity has been perhaps the most important function of the initiative because of the key role that neighborhoods play in it. If neighborhoods cannot come together to set priorities, gather resources and implement their goals, the initiative as a whole cannot succeed.

In many neighborhoods, capacity has proven to be the dividing line between success and failure. Successful neighborhoods "are the ones that care the most and have placed their own projects as number one on their agenda," Joan Kennedy said. Neighborhoods where leaders have assumed responsibility for seeing projects through and who have made neighborhood work almost a

full-time job generally have achieved their goals, while less successful neighborhoods have lacked one or more of these elements.

When the initiative began, the Neighborhood Office often found itself serving as a link to potential neighborhood partners. This task has evolved over time as the office has established itself and staff has implemented tools and programs. Today, the office's neighborhood facilitators serve more as coaches and consultants to neighborhood organizations and less as links between the community and city government.

The neighborhoods that have come forward to participate generally have done so under two different guises. "A neighborhood organization may come in and not be effective, because they've had the same person in charge for a number of years, and no one is coming out to meetings," Kennedy said. "Or, we may have five people come through the door who want to organize, but they don't know what to do." The more complex the issue, the more complex the capacity issues usually are.

This is where the facilitators come in. Their work can be as basic as facilitating a meeting or helping neighborhood leaders inform residents about meeting times.

Although this investment of staff

time helps to create effective neighborhood leaders and, by extension, effective neighborhood groups, the individualized nature of the work means that facilitators must help to develop new leadership whenever someone leaves his or her post, a phenomenon that happens frequently in some neighborhoods.

"If you invest too much in a single person, and that person for whatever reason ceases to be an effective leader, you are nowhere, you're back to square one," Kennedy said.

As a result, in recent years, a key function of the Neighborhood Office has been to develop organizational capacity that is not tied to individuals. Neighborhood College has been Hampton's primary tool to achieve this, and over time, the program has evolved to meet the needs of the city and the program's participants.

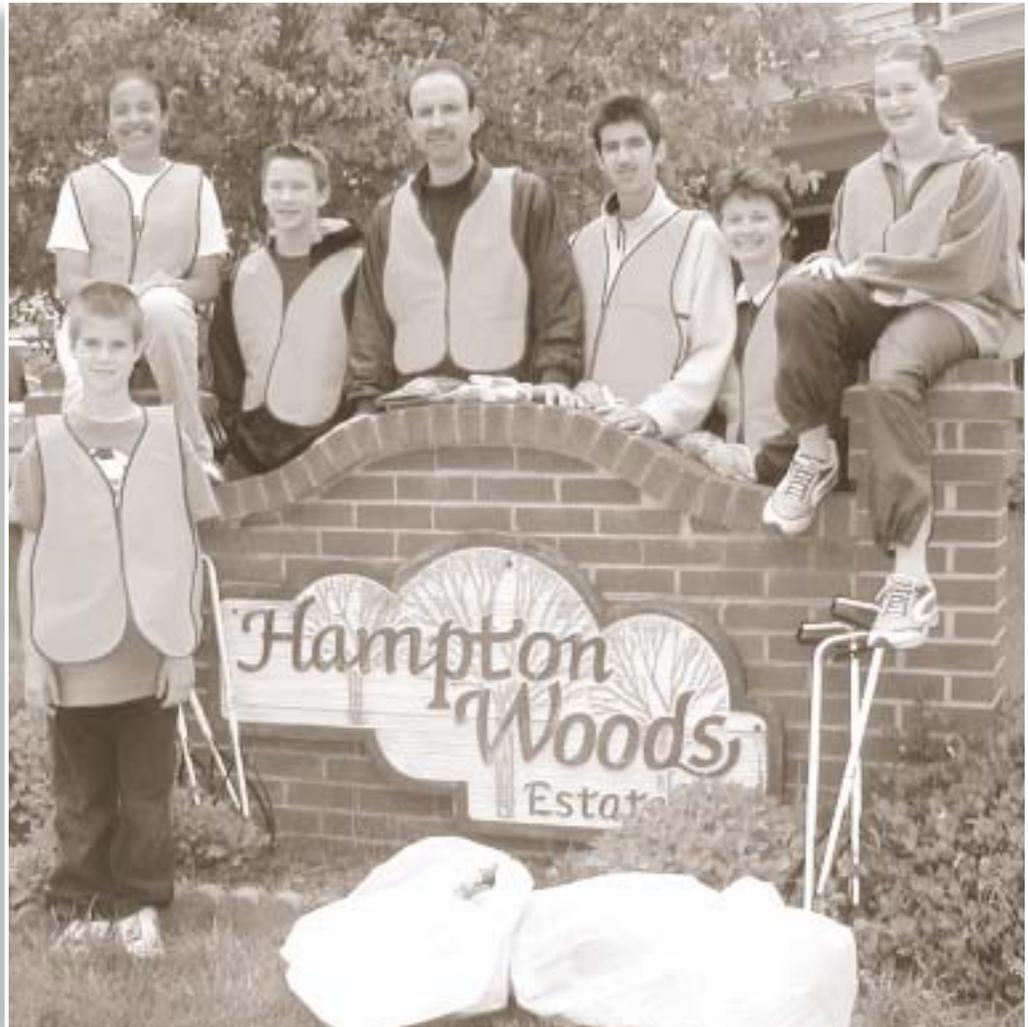
The original design required participants to meet twice a week for 12 weeks, a commitment that proved to be too time- and resource- intensive for everyone involved. So the city divided the course into two parts. The first teaches residents how to be more effective citizens, while the second gathers neighborhood leaders in a classroom, provides them with skill-building exercises, then sends them out to apply these skills in their neighborhoods.

By providing leaders with a forum to work together, the city is encouraging them to create a peer network to help support one another. To augment these efforts, the city is developing a third phase of Neighborhood College that will focus on organizational development, in a forum that resembles the kind of training provided to a public board or commission. These sessions will focus on building the core competencies of neighborhood organizations.

Although capacity-building efforts are intended to help neighborhoods accomplish their goals, the means of building community can be an end in itself. This is another important point.

“Working together for a common cause often can make the biggest difference in a neighborhood’s quality of life,” Kennedy said.

Residents do not work together unless they feel invested in their neighborhoods. Indeed, one of the hallmarks of the Neighborhoods Initiative is the emotion with which people both inside and outside city government speak of it. In many ways, the initiative has prompted in residents new feelings about the city, in addition to new attitudes (see story on *Buckroe Beach*). ■



INTERNAL AND
EXTERNAL
PUSH AND PULL:
AN ENDURING
THEME

Given Joan Kennedy's history as planning director and the role of planners in creating the program, the initiative had a strong planning flavor in its early years. As noted earlier, the initial idea of the initiative was to divide the city into neighborhoods, pick three neighborhoods each year, complete plans for these areas, and then move on to the next set of neighborhoods until every neighborhood in Hampton had a plan.

But as neighborhoods became involved in the initiative (participating as pilots and with neighborhood leaders serving on the steering committee), the process broke down. The design then was changed so that every neighborhood that stepped forward could participate, and many of these neighborhoods, when given the opportunity, came into the process on their own terms and with their own ideas about what they wanted to do.

This experience caused the city to evaluate the program design, at which time *internal* issues such as the problem of how to allocate city resources became apparent. As the city worked on these internal issues, several *external* issues came into focus, including the need to improve neighborhood capacity, which led, in turn, to programs such as Neighborhood College. The



first 10 years of the initiative can be viewed, then, as a push and pull of internal and external issues, coupled with the city's responses to these issues in the form of programs and other interventions.

The history and evolution of the initiative can be viewed another way as well. In broad terms, the initiative has performed four functions: allocating resources, building neighborhood capacity, reaching out to the public and organizing itself.

The programs that fall under each of these functions can be thought of as *building blocks* that, together, make up the initiative. In this way, Neighborhood College can be thought of as one of the primary building blocks for building neighborhood capacity, while organizational initiatives such as the Neighborhood Task Force can be seen as a building block or foundation for allocating city resources. ■

Success, it turns out, sometimes hinges on small improvements. Although some neighborhoods joined the initiative to develop large projects such as community centers, other smaller and less visible improvements often are just as important to a neighborhood's vitality. Ironically, because of their size and the way city government was structured, some of these small improvements were among the most difficult to carry out.

A number of neighborhoods, for example, wanted more streetlights to improve safety and reduce crime. These projects qualified for the city's list of proposed public works projects, but to build a small-ticket item like a streetlight or two was not easy. The city prioritized the project list to maximize its limited resources, but because the city had no way to pay for small-ticket items unless money was taken from larger ones, small projects were seldom completed. Given the city's financial situation, this was not going to change unless a new source of funds was created.

In 1995, the Neighborhood Task Force recommended that the city establish a Neighborhood Improvement Fund to support neighborhood-level public improvements. Eventually the fund was divided into two separate programs: matching grants for small, self-help projects and the larger

Neighborhood Improvement Fund for projects that involved physical improvements to public property. Nearly 100 neighborhood-based projects have received support through these funds since their inception.

Matching grants are available for short-term, collaborative projects that are consistent with the initiative's goals. Projects may be social in nature or involve physical improvements to public or private property. However, they must be designed to increase neighborhood capacity or reinforce a sense of community.

Although the city does not limit the scope of projects eligible for matching grants, the grants themselves are limited to \$5,000. To receive one, a neighborhood organization must collaborate with other groups and/or city agencies. They also must provide matching resources (through fundraising or sweat equity) for each dollar the city invests. In addition to labor and cash, the city also accepts land donations and donations of materials and services as part of the match.

Programs like the Neighborhood Development Fund point to the value and effectiveness of the Neighborhood Task Force. City manager Bob O'Neill established the task force after it became apparent

that the initiative could not move forward until city government operated in a manner that allowed it to serve neighborhoods – the internal alignment issue discussed earlier. This experience had taught city officials a lesson. "If you have a department with a strategic focus and no control over resources," like the Neighborhood Office, "you are set up for failure," Joan Kennedy said.

In effect, the Neighborhood Task Force was an internal capacity-building tool. The task force developed a strategic plan and came up with the idea of a Neighborhood Commission made up of neighborhood leaders who would govern the initiative. The task force also involved itself in the day-to-day issues, for example, in the way the city was addressing neighborhood blight.

"Nobody in the city was looking at neighborhood issues proactively, so that became the task force's role," Kennedy said. Over the years, the task force would examine issues such as public safety and develop other ideas that city departments work together to implement. ■

SMALL
IMPROVEMENTS
MAKE A BIG
DIFFERENCE



NEIGHBORHOOD
PLANNING:
HELPING
NEIGHBORHOODS
SHAPE THEIR FUTURE



Say “Greater Wythe Area Plan” in Hampton and staff roll their eyes or sigh. And that’s before you ask the citizens what they think. Planning director Terry O’Neill recalls one resident of the Greater Wythe neighborhood in southwestern Hampton who grew exasperated after many meetings, frustrated at a process that seemed to go on and on. Finally, he announced to the group, “When I first got into this, all I wanted was a neighborhood watch.”

The Wythe plan was one of the first plans undertaken by Neighborhood Office, and, after eight months of start-up time, the several-month planning process (that in some ways continues to the present day and) that ensued eventually resulted in a new neighborhood plan.

Since embarking on the Wythe plan, the city’s approach to neighborhood planning has evolved, and it helps to understand what leaders were trying to change.

In the years before the initiative, the Department of Planning worked with neighborhoods to develop small area plans, most of which focused on land use. Deciding that this approach was too limited, especially in neighborhoods where land use was just one of many pertinent issues, city officials decided that neighborhood plans drafted under the initiative

ideally would address physical, social and civic issues.



This more holistic conceptualization of the plan created challenges on both sides of the table. On the city side, many different departments needed to be present if the plan were to address a broad array of issues. Yet many of these departments were not used to planning with neighborhoods, nor did they believe they had sufficient staff capacity to be involved at all of the meetings. Neighborhoods, on the other hand, were used to physical planning, and the first issues they usually put on the table focused on “curb and gutter” problems, no matter what was really happening in the neighborhood. Both sides had to figure out how to work comprehensively.

There also was an internal coordination issue. Although the

Neighborhood Office operates separately from the Department of Planning, it participates in the drafting of neighborhood plans, with Neighborhood Office staff often serving as plan facilitators. Despite this organizational distance, the neighborhood planning process plays a key role in the initiative, for it is through plans that neighborhoods set priorities (which serve as the basis for the city’s funding decisions and provide direction to the neighborhoods that create them).

Hampton has created several templates it follows to complete neighborhood plans. When a neighborhood enters the process mistrusting city government, however, planners set aside these templates and engage the neighborhood’s stakeholders in designing the process. This is an important innovation because the partnership required during the implementation process requires that neighborhoods be invested in their plans, and having neighborhoods buy into the process at the outset helps to ensure this outcome.

Hampton, like many communities, also struggles with representation and communication within its planning process. Are the stakeholders at the table representative and do they communicate with the broader

community? City planners have encouraged stakeholders to act as information conduits to their neighbors. This process has worked well in some neighborhoods, but not in others, as planners have discovered that some stakeholders are not adept at, or even interested in, involving others from their neighborhoods.

“Many people have clamored for more (public) involvement,” Joan Kennedy said, “but once they themselves were involved they didn’t see the need to involve anyone else.” Through this experience, staff has learned that, in the absence of effective communication networks in neighborhoods, stakeholders have a difficult time representing their areas. This challenge is now managed explicitly as a part of the process design for a neighborhood plan.

The planning process has suffered in some neighborhoods from a non-representative mix of stakeholders. The mix matters because the people at the table determine the direction and outcome of the plan. In the Newtown neighborhood, for example, the process began with several adult stakeholders who told the city officials at the table that the neighborhood did not have many youth. Upon looking at the data, however, the group found that Newtown had a higher concentration of young people than the average

neighborhood in Hampton. Later, when youth were brought into the process, they became a major part of the plan. Similar types of disconnects have surfaced among stakeholders in other neighborhoods.

As the city has worked with more and more neighborhoods, it has become apparent that a plan is not the most appropriate intervention in neighborhoods that have more immediate needs. Further, the city does not have the staff and resources to complete full-blown plans in every neighborhood.

To help the Neighborhood Office decide when a plan was appropriate, the Neighborhood Task Force developed a “decision tree” that helps to determine whether neighborhood requests would be served best through existing resources, a plan, or other types of interventions. Although this tool has been effective, it was never in common use, although staff from the Neighborhood Office apply its concepts when deciding how best to work with neighborhoods.

Expectations also pose a challenge. Sometimes, as the planning process moves toward implementation, there is confusion on what the roles of the neighborhood and the city will be. To clarify these roles, the city has found it helpful to develop a memorandum of understanding that specifies who will

contribute what during the planning process. This memo also addresses logistical issues and other ground rules. Officers from the neighborhood organizations and city staff sign these agreements, which have helped to clear up confusion and provide a roadmap for implementation.

Despite all of these challenges, the neighborhood planning process in Hampton generally has been successful. Because the City Council has been willing to fund major projects identified in neighborhood plans, neighborhoods know their hard work will be rewarded and, consequently, they believe in the process.

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“Every process is different,” Kennedy said. “One of the lessons we learned over time is that a neighborhood plan is a good opportunity for people to learn about the neighbor-

hood, and what we think of as characteristics of a neighborhood often are not borne out by the data. So we as staff look at neighborhoods through different eyes as well.”

Work on neighborhood plans led to other lessons as well:

- Neighborhoods want problems with city services solved before they are willing to take the concept of a partnership seriously.
- Although the details changed, the Healthy Neighborhoods design was on target if everybody abided by the guiding principles.
- Every time a new stakeholder came to the table, the recommendations for neighborhood plans had to be revised before the new person would accept them. ■

REACHING OUT
TO THE
COMMUNITY:
NEIGHBORHOOD
MONTH



Although the initiative tapped into the latent demand of many neighborhoods to work with the city to achieve a goal (whether they envisioned themselves as partners with the city or not), the process of involving neighborhoods has not been an easy one. Although many neighborhood leaders literally “lined up at the door” when the Neighborhood Office opened, not every neighborhood was represented. Others had to be invited to partici-

pate, and the initiative had to reach out to the community to bring them in. Even neighborhoods that have been involved since the initiative began have varied in their level of involvement over the years. Thus, community outreach has been an ongoing process.

Spurred by the program’s early successes, the Neighborhood Commission decided in 1997 to raise the initiative’s profile through a celebration of neighborhoods it called





NEIGHBORHOODS... The Heart of Hampton



Neighborhood Week. Enthusiasm about the idea swelled, and dozens of volunteers stepped forward to create a program that exceeded the expectations of many. However, it was tremendously difficult to make all of the activities happen within one week. The basic concept of Neighborhood Week was a good one, however, and the event was later expanded into Neighborhood Month.

Neighborhood Month is a month long celebration of unity and neigh-

borhood pride hosted by the Hampton Neighborhood Commission. Neighborhoods, as the brochure states, "are a cause for celebration because not only are they the 'Heart of Hampton' but where we live, work, and play." Events include open houses, neighborhood yard sales, community picnics, multicultural festivals, community cleanups, marathons, and even a trip to the national Neighborhoods USA conference. ■



A DECADE OF LESSONS LEARNED



As the Neighborhoods Initiative enters its second decade, the first 10 years of experience has yielded many lessons about collaborating with neighborhoods, both positive and negative.

On the plus side:

- Decisions on allocating city resources are better.
- Neighborhoods that participate in the process make sure that projects are implemented and take responsibility for that implementation.
- Neighborhood plans are more comprehensive and relate better to what people in neighborhoods really care about.
- Neighborhood plans have a better chance of being implemented.

However:

- The process is messy.
- The city loses some control over the process.
- The process is resource intensive.
- The process takes more time than a process without as much public participation.

“These community involvement processes, especially in neighborhoods, are not just a method to seek public involvement; they actually become part of the process of building and sustaining a sense of community in neighborhoods,” said Joan Kennedy. “People get to know and understand their neighbors; they learn and come to care about their neighborhood; they start to work on things together; they become a community instead of just people who happen to live in the same area of the city.”

Communities that want to emulate Hampton’s model still must customize its elements to their situation, said former city manager Bob O’Neill, who has studied the issue nationally and who applied the principles of reinventing government to Fairfax County, Virginia after leaving Hampton in 1997.

“Conceptually, this approach is broad enough to apply, but there is no set of universal techniques that work in a cookie-cutter fashion,” he said. “What a neighborhood strategy looks like has a lot to do with a city’s neighborhoods, culture and the level of trust in neighborhoods among political leaders.

“People want to make the places where they live better,” O’Neill said. “When you give them an opportunity

to make a contribution, they are willing to do it.”

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— BOB O’NEILL
FORMER CITY MANAGER

Terry O’Neill, the city’s planning director, said the relationships built by the initiative have allowed city officials to “know what’s between the words” written in neighborhood plans.

“The initiative has done a great deal to improve relations with the community,” O’Neill said. “We truly believe we are making far better decisions because we have a much better sense of the community.”



Terry O'Neill said Hampton was fortunate to have, from the outset, many community leaders who understood and valued collaboration. "Without those individuals participating, I'm not sure we could have sustained" the initiative, he said.

The program, in turn, has helped to spawn a network that allows officials to know whom to call when issues arise. And before they make a call, a relationship has already been forged, trust exists and both sides understand they can give their honest opinions, discuss their viewpoints quickly and reach an understanding, Terry O'Neill said.

"It really is of immense value," he said.

Terry O'Neill credits the leadership of Mayor James Eason, who supported the program when it was just a concept, and Bob O'Neill, who as city manager was willing to take chances to make it work. They helped to instill within city government the willingness to look at problems creatively and were able to foster among city employees a trust that they could find answers to the issues at hand.

These efforts have embedded in Hampton the spirit of collaboration as a fundamental value. "It is so

immersed, there's no way to stop it," Terry O'Neill said.

Neighborhoods now expect high level of interaction from city government and are willing to demand it if it does not happen.

As the city and its neighborhoods look toward the future, Kennedy and others see the initiative growing *broader*, by having every area of the city represented by an active and effective neighborhood-serving organization, and *deeper*, by getting all neighborhoods to have defined objectives as well as plans to make measurable progress in meeting them.

Regardless how it proceeds, the initiative is in Hampton to stay.

Assistant city manager Mike Monteith believes the initiative would continue to function even if he, Joan Kennedy and other key leaders were to leave the city.

"It may change form and might even take a step backwards, but I think (if the city were to take another approach), there would be enough uncomfortableness with the way the city did business that the City Council would eventually wonder why they were working a lot harder than they used to, and something would come forward to fill that gap," Monteith said. "The community would demand to be involved." ■





Y.H. THOMAS:
THE MAGICAL POINT OF INTERVENTION

To understand the sense of ownership and pride that the volunteers at the Y.H. Thomas Community Center have for their facility, consider **ERNIE FERGUSON**. Every weekday for almost seven years, Ferguson, 68, who is retired, has served as facilities manager, working morning, noon and night, without receiving so much as a penny for his time.

His fellow volunteers refer to him as “Mr. Ferguson,” and, although they log many hours themselves, they speak about him with a combination of awe and pride.

“He works here like it’s his job,” says Leroy Crosby, president of the Y.H. Thomas Community Center board, on which Ferguson also serves.

“We couldn’t stop him if we wanted to,” says Will Moffett, the center’s executive director.

“I love what I’m doing,” Ferguson says. “I’m going to be honest. I can’t imagine not doing what I’m doing.”⁶

How the Old North Hampton neighborhood partnered with the city to create and sustain the Y.H. Thomas center is one of the initiative’s biggest success stories. It is also a story of good timing, because it serves as an example of the “magic point of intervention,” according to

Joan Kennedy, head of Hampton’s Neighborhood Office.

Old North Hampton is a predominantly black, low-income neighborhood in central Hampton, just north of Interstate 64 and less than a mile northwest of City Hall. Although the neighborhood is not rich in resources, it has a strong sense of neighborhood pride. Since 1953, it also has served as home to one of Hampton’s greatest neighborhood assets: the former Y.H. Thomas Junior High School.

However, in the years before the center opened, the neighborhood had been experiencing a downward spiral due to crime, drugs, juvenile delinquency, and absentee landlords. Families struggled to find safe places for their children to play, seniors feared the streets and neighborhood leaders had grave concerns about the future.

The community recognized the potential of renovating the school building to provide many of services it needed to improve itself. But the city, facing competing priorities for new community facilities and facing significant economic challenges, did not have the resources needed to fund

the construction and operation of a community center.

“If you look at socioeconomic data, the neighborhood has a lot (of potential issues) to focus on,” says Kennedy. “But they had a lot of different neighborhood-based organizations that pulled together around a common cause.

“In this case, the neighborhood identified what was key and important to them, and we had good sense to respond,” she said.

From 1953 to 1968, Y.H. Thomas served as the first and only junior high school for African-Americans in Hampton, drawing students from the entire city. Named after Yarborough Henry Thomas, an African-American educator who served as principal of Hampton’s Union Street School for 25 years before his death in 1946, the school shared many of the traits of the neighborhood that surrounds it: short on resources, teachers and students focused on what they had and worked together to make things better.

Former students recall that books were worn after many years of use. Pages were missing, others were



ripped, and the covers were tattered. The administrative staff was small, but the teachers looked out for their students and instilled values that the alumni still carry today.

If a student needed lunch money, a teacher was there to help, recalls Sheila Williams, who graduated in 1967. “The teachers taught us well,” she said. “They gave us one-on-one attention as much as possible. They would challenge us to look beyond the barriers and tell us that ‘you can be somebody.’ They tried to extend the morals we had at home. They molded us and prepared us for adolescence.”

The school closed in 1968 when Hampton integrated its schools. Students scattered to other schools, but many stayed in touch with one another. Meanwhile, the building was used for other purposes but slowly fell into disrepair.

In 1986, a group of parents in the neighborhood organized the Y.H. Thomas Athletic Association, using the school grounds for football and cheerleading practice. The program was successful, and as its popularity grew, association leaders looked at the deteriorating building and began to think about how they might use it.

In 1992, a year before the Neighborhoods Initiative began, the neighborhood organized the Coalition



for Community Pride and Progress to convert part of the building into a community center. Although the neighborhood was not the next in line for a community center, city manager Bob O’Neill realized the opportunity the proposal presented, and so, upon his urging, the City Council agreed to support the renovation with \$1.25 million in capital budget funds.

The project would inform the city’s thinking on future neighborhood collaborations. “It really set the stage for the Neighborhood Initiative and was a model for future projects,” Joan Kennedy said.

The coalition proposed a partnership where the city would fund the renovation if the community assumed the responsibility of developing programs, managing the center and operating it. The partnership helped to spark a grassroots neighborhood revitalization strategy, and the center opened in 1996.

By turning a deteriorating building into a thriving neighborhood center, the Old North Hampton community preserved an important community asset and created a gathering place to meet the neighborhood’s cultural, civic and social needs. The project also proved that the neighborhood, with help from the city and a citywide base of volunteers, had the ability to carry out its goals.

“The community has a sense of self-esteem,” Moffett said. “This was a community that felt downtrodden and disenfranchised, with all the open-air drug dealing, violence and deterioration and blight. This facility has done a lot to give people a sense of empowerment and of being able to control their own destiny.”

Today the center hosts more than 15 programs, including tutoring, mentoring and athletic programs. Participation in these programs has increased 25 percent in recent years,



and 30,000 people walked through the doors in 2001. A large roster of volunteers donates a total of 650 hours to the center each month.

Partnership is key to the center's success. The project relied on a \$910,000 from the Community Development Block Grant fund, as well as \$150,000 from the Hampton school district, \$425,000 from AmeriCorps and \$85,000 in Neighborhood Development Funds. The AmeriCorps grant helped to train 35 young people (many from the neighborhood) to help in the renovation, which in turn reduced the project's cost.

The community also worked side by side with the city to ensure a smooth transition when the center opened. The Parks and Recreation Center loaned the center an executive who taught the neighborhood how to operate a center. The relationship between the center and the department has remained close, as parks and recreation staff have provided ongoing training for volunteers, as well as ongoing support as needed.

Many of the volunteers belong to the Y.H. Thomas Alumni Association, which was established in 1999.

Scores of former classmates had kept in touch with one another in small groups over the years, but the alumni had no formal organization.

Several were involved in the Coalition for Community Pride and Progress, and, after the center opened, a few decided to host a reunion to catch up with people they had not seen, in some cases, since they had graduated. None of the organizers had ever heard of a junior high school reunion, either, but, undaunted, they began to contact everyone they knew, finally staging the event in November 1999.

After the reunion, the group established an association and created a foundation that has raised more than \$55,000 in scholarship funds. The association also organizes and staffs the Kids Café, an after-school meal and tutoring program.



The center itself is a flurry of activity on weekday afternoons, with teenagers playing basketball in the gym, friends gathering in the lobby, and others participating in the Kids Café and working in the computer lab. Will Moffett oversees it all, trying

to instill the same values of respect and mentoring that the teachers at the school did a generation ago.

When he's not talking with young people, he catches up with volunteers like Albert Simpson, a member of the center's board of directors.

Simpson said he feels connected to the school because of its history and its link to the community, both the immediate neighborhood and the city at large.

"I did not want to see this building turned down and (Thomas's) legacy destroyed, to see his name put into rubble," Simpson said. "I love this town. This is my town."

Neighborhood efforts like the Y.H. Thomas center are one reason the National Civic League recognized Hampton as an "All America City" in 2002.

"The capacity and the pride of the community are extraordinary," Kennedy said. "They had a group that had a strong sense of ownership and that wanted to stay and fight for their neighborhood instead of abandoning it." ■



Neighborhood efforts like the Y.H. Thomas center are one reason the National Civic League recognized Hampton as an "All America City" in 2002.



ABERDEEN DRAWS ON HISTORY
TO DEMONSTRATE
EXTRAORDINARY
NEIGHBORHOOD CAPACITY

You cannot understand the Aberdeen Gardens neighborhood, its extraordinary level of community involvement or its capacity to achieve its goals without first understanding its history.

As the nation's only resettlement community designed and constructed by African-Americans for African-Americans, Aberdeen has fostered within its residents a sense of community ownership, unity and strength since the days the first homes were built in the 1930s.

This line of history remains unbroken. Some of the modest but sturdy red brick homes have been in the same families for almost 70 years, and people who grew up in Aberdeen but have moved elsewhere often return to reminisce and see old friends.

"The people of Aberdeen believe that the history of our neighborhood belongs to all of us," said Roosevelt Wilson, president of the Aberdeen Gardens Historic and Civic Association. "It inspires us and bonds us. This is a neighborhood that blacks built for themselves, and that spirit of ownership and self-sufficiency lives on today."

When the Neighborhoods Initiative was launched in 1993, Aberdeen was ready and eager to participate. In late 1992, several

descendents of the first settlers had met to talk about how they could commemorate their parents by having the neighborhood designated as a historic district and building a museum, perhaps by converting one of the neighborhood's few vacant homes into a showcase.

These descendents, known as the Aberdeen Rattlers because they used to play organized softball, have focused their energy since their playing days on promoting the neighborhood's history and looking after neighbors who are ill or elderly.

They became the force behind the civic association, collaborating with other neighborhood residents to establish a nonprofit organization in 1993. The next year, the association petitioned for and received a historic designation for the neighborhood from the Commonwealth of Virginia. Soon thereafter, they began to collaborate with the city on an 18-month process to draft a neighborhood plan.

Working with the city helped the neighborhood find a direction and identify "something to work for," Wilson said. The neighborhood was inspired by the city's mission to create the most livable community in Virginia and decided to adopt a similar charge: "To enhance the quality of life for all citizens in historic Aberdeen Gardens and

adjacent neighborhoods, with an emphasis on heritage, to become the most livable community in the United States."

This mission is echoed in the neighborhood's theme: "In unity, there is strength, and with commitment and work, we can achieve."

The goals the neighborhood identified through the planning process articulate its desire to be inclusive and work with youth, adults and older people alike.

Through community outreach, the neighborhood seeks to:

- Provide the kind of neighborhood that ensures the protection, involvement and well-being of the senior/elderly population of our community in a manner that allows for a healthy peace of mind.
- Develop and support neighborhood institutions (facilities and organizations) to increase involvement in social, civic and political activities within the community.
- Create a neighborhood in which all youth develop a sense of responsibility and a desire to be part of their community.

The planning process sharpened the neighborhood's desire to build a

*"In unity,
there is strength,
and
with commitment
and work,
we can achieve."*

— ABERDEEN
NEIGHBORHOOD THEME



museum. Given the city's commitment through the Neighborhoods Initiative to help neighborhoods carry out their top priorities (as identified in a neighborhood plan), Aberdeen and the Neighborhood Office set out to create something that would preserve, protect and promote the neighborhood's heritage.

"The neighborhood has a core group of people who have a strong sense of community ownership and are willing to work together for their neighborhood," said Joan Kennedy, director of Hampton's Neighborhood Office.

In 1997, the neighborhood asked the city to purchase and donate a dilapidated house on Mary Peake Boulevard that had been damaged in a fire. As soon as the association controlled the house, volunteers began to make repairs and prevent the house from deteriorating further. The neighborhood then teamed with the Peninsula Homebuilders Association to make more substantial repairs to the roof and structure.

Working with the Neighborhood Office, the association secured a \$100,000 grant from the state to complete the restoration. To match the grant, the neighborhood organized a procurement committee to solicit construction bids and receive contracts, as well as a restoration

committee to organize volunteers who would commit themselves to work on the museum and fulfill the match through sweat-equity.

All of these efforts were successful. The procurement committee developed a system for evaluating, documenting and reporting in-kind donations that became a model for the state. A local architectural firm donated restoration plans, and the Virginia Extension Service provided training for gardeners who landscaped the grounds. Another committee was set up to inspect and approve the restoration work.

The strength and breadth of these partnerships have impressed observers. In 2002, Aberdeen was recognized by Neighborhoods USA, a non-profit organization committed to building and strengthening neighborhood organizations, as its national neighborhood of the year.

The volunteers logged thousands of hours and completed the restoration in June 2001. The association also acquired an adjacent property to create a museum complex to host visitors as well as neighborhood meetings. The facility was dedicated in September 2002.

That Aberdeen was able to pull off such a complex project is a testament to its legacy of self-sufficiency.

The neighborhood was developed

during the Great Depression through a New Deal homestead resettlement program designed to relieve economic hardship and create new jobs. Approximately 100 resettlement communities were developed across the United States in the 1930s, but Aberdeen Gardens was the only one built by blacks for blacks.

The initiative sought to resettle inadequately housed low-income families in new communities built with public funds. The Hampton area was targeted because the shipyards and industries of Newport News, a few miles southwest of Aberdeen, employed large numbers of blacks, some of whom lived in slum housing.

The program provided tenants with low-cost, modern garden homes in a rural environment (the area was outside the city limits of Hampton at the time) where they could use their back lots to raise chickens and grow vegetables. The first tenants paid \$3 a month in rent. A chicken coop was built on each lot and the community as a whole received 12 cows and 12 mules.

The first model homes opened in November 1936 and families began to move in the next year. When the neighborhood was completed in 1938, it contained a school, a commercial area and 158 two-story brick homes. The original school has



been torn down and reconstructed but the original houses and commercial buildings remain.

During World War II, tenants were allowed to buy their homes.

The original seven roads had alphabetical names from “A” to “G” but were renamed by officials from the Hampton Institute (now Hampton University) to recognize prominent African-Americans. Mary Peake, for example, taught at the first school for escaped slaves at Hampton University.

Hilyard Robinson, considered the premier black architect of his day, supervised the design. He conceived the project as a garden house development organized around the Aberdeen Road corridor, which provided the community with its name.

The houses themselves are designed in a Colonial Revival style.

“Most of the people out here were born and raised here,” said Howard Cary, the civic association’s vice president. “Most neighborhoods, the parents pass, and that’s it, somebody else moves in. But most of these houses are owned by the original families, and now third and fourth generations are living here.”

The museum project provided Aberdeen with a momentum to tackle other projects. Working again with the city, the neighborhood helped to secure city funding for a \$3 million,



24,000-square foot community center (pictured above), which will open in the Fall of 2003 adjacent to Lindsay Middle School.

The neighborhood involved youth as well as representatives from the city’s parks and recreation department in designing programs for the center, hoping to create a mix of activities that would attract young people.

The idea is to give youth a safe, supervised and nurturing place to spend their free time, Roosevelt Wilson said. “Up until now, we haven’t had a facility or community center,” he said.

The building includes a gymnasium with basketball and volleyball courts, a fitness room, a multipurpose room for exercise and a lobby featuring a two-story glass window entrance and a climbing wall.

Wilson credits the Neighborhood Initiative with helping the neighborhood succeed. “It empowers us to do something for ourselves,” he said.

“We know we have a place downtown where we can get answers. We don’t have to run all around the city trying to find out who to talk with.”

Wilson works closely with the Neighborhood Office, especially senior neighborhood facilitator Shellae Blackwell, and feels comfortable calling her whenever he needs help. “Shellae is like my right arm,” Wilson said, “whenever I have a problem, I always run it by her. She points us in the right direction. We have an easy relationship.”

Because of the help the Neighborhood Office provides, Wilson said the neighborhood never misses a deadline on projects. During the neighborhood planning process, for example, the neighborhood worked so closely with the city, it was as if “they were part of our organization,” Wilson said, especially the city’s code compliance and police officers, who remain on a first-name basis with neighborhood leaders.

“They look out for us, and we look out for them,” Wilson said.

The neighborhood also works closely with staff from the Parks and Recreation Department. City staff help the neighborhood operate its “yard of the month” competition.

Aberdeen has made a point of encouraging its residents to attend Neighborhood College. “We make sure we get people there to see what the government does, as well as what they can do for themselves,” Wilson said.

Wilson said the level of neighborhood involvement has been a boon to him as president because his neighbors shoulder much of the responsibility for carrying out neighborhood work.

The organization has 22 committees, each of which has no more than four or five people. Wilson said he prefers to have more committees with fewer members so the panels can concentrate on a small number of tasks.

Wilson said the Neighborhood Initiative provides Aberdeen with a direction as well as “something to work for.”

“I tell people that if you adhere to the principles and listen to them, it will lead to a better organization for the neighborhood,” he said. ■



EMBRACING YOUTH
AS PARTNERS

Although youth have been central to the Neighborhoods Initiative since it began, the concept of youth as true partners in the process did not take hold until Terry O’Neill had an epiphany one day.

O’Neill, director of Hampton’s Department of Planning, was facilitating a neighborhood plan in Aberdeen, working with the usual mix of stakeholders, mostly adults, of course. But this time, with help from the Hampton Coalition for Youth and Alternatives, Inc., a non-profit agency that works with young people, several teenagers were at the table, too.

Although he was eager to work with youth, O’Neill expected that the teens would become bored with the planning process. Instead, they understood the issues readily, took an unbiased approach to the problems the group was working on, and asked good questions. O’Neill was very impressed.

“That turned on the light bulb for me,” O’Neill said. “In some neighborhoods, 20 percent of the population is under the age of 20, but youth had been underrepresented in the planning process. I became convinced that, not only could (youth be involved in planning), but that the process would have been different if the young people had not been part of it.”

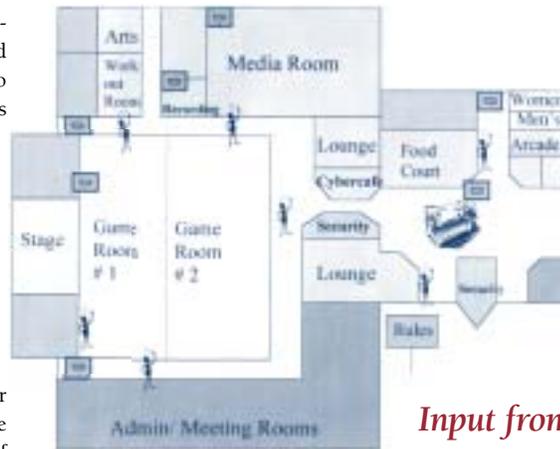
Input from the young people

helped to change the way the neighborhood conceived a proposed community center. The adults who supported a center tended to focus on physical amenities, like basketball courts, while youth were more interested in a place to work on computers and meet their friends. The final design would incorporate both of these elements and save the city money.

“The young people redefined what the community center was for them,” O’Neill said. “As adults, we tend to do things in the name of young people and design facilities through our eyes, but that’s not what they see. And you will never be able to know that unless you know what their perspective is.”

After this experience, O’Neill began to work with Cindy Carlson of the Coalition for Youth and Richard Goll, founder of Alternatives, brainstorming how to get young people more involved in the initiative. Their work prompted O’Neill to hire two youth planners and add a youth component to the city’s comprehensive plan. The energy generated by this effort, in turn, helped to reinvigorate the city’s Youth Commission.

From then on, youth would be involved in the planning process in Hampton from the beginning. “They



Input from the young people helped to change the way the neighborhood conceived a proposed community center.

are even involved in the process design,” O’Neill said.

“Most planners go to great lengths to get all kinds of adults involved — people of every race, culture and socioeconomic group,” he said. “But how can you say you’ve done all you can do if you’re not including young people?”

O’Neill and other city officials may have been eager to work with youth, but, as bureaucrats, they had little experience in doing so. Figuring out how best to engage youth would be a learning process. So the city decided to rely on experts in youth outreach to help build these relationships.

Carlson would be an invaluable resource, having led Alternatives’

The coalition's mission was to create an environment where youth can contribute to the community's quality of life.

prevention, intervention and education services for 17 years. She staffed the original Coalition for Youth that later became a city department focused on the city's youth agenda.

The coalition's mission was to create an environment where youth can contribute to the community's quality of life. Rather than focusing on youth problems, the coalition sought to empower youth to reach their potential by collaborating with them as resources and developing community partnerships directed toward youth success.

"When youth issues come up, whether they're related to violence and safety or something else, we convene the process," Carlson said. With a staff of only three professionals, the department does its outreach work through Alternatives, whose staff has years of experience working with Hampton's young people.

Alternatives itself was created in 1973 as a drug treatment agency. As more and more people began to focus on youth as assets, however, the organization reinvented itself to focus on youth and community development.

"By focusing on youth as the



problem, you're never going to be successful," Goll said. "We needed to shift away from fixing kids to fixing the system."

The agency begins working with young people in seventh and eighth grades through community service projects, service groups and peer-to-peer education. The organization also sponsors a youth leadership class for ninth graders, and graduates often move on to serve on the city's youth commission.

Although the coalition seeks to serve all youth, the young people who participate through Alternatives tend to be in their mid-teens. At that age, youth have the right mix of time

and desire to participate. But the small window of opportunity means that the population of participants is constantly turning over.

"It's hard work," Carlson said. "If adults are closed to the idea of youth being partners, then the effort tends to be more of a group for the kids, and that's not what it's all about. It's about working together to make Hampton a better place for everyone, and we are fortunate to have youth who will work with us."

In Hampton, any young person who wants to participate in a program supported by Alternatives is invited to do so. The agency does not try to screen the participants.



“Other communities identify the best and brightest young people and invite them to serve on boards. We don’t think that works,” said Kathy Johnson, executive director of Alternatives. Instead, the Hampton model is to build the skills of neighborhood youth so they can participate at a variety of levels of civic engagement.

Since the first days of the Aberdeen plan, hundreds of youth have taken leadership roles in their neighborhood, worked with their adult partners to build community and

tackle problems. Because of their commitment, and to ensure their ongoing input, a Neighborhood Youth Advisory Board was created. Youth now have ongoing input into the Neighborhood Initiative.

“We’re building the infrastructure for the growth and development of our young people, so they can give back now, not in the future,” Johnson said. ■





MICHELLE SIMPSON:
NEIGHBORHOOD COLLEGE HELPS ONE MOTHER
INSPIRE HUNDREDS OF YOUNG MINDS

If not for Neighborhood College, **MICHELLE SIMPSON** likely would not have had the opportunity to inspire hundreds of young minds.

As a mother of three, Simpson had climbed the ladder at Federal Express in Hampton for 13 years, starting as a casual courier and working her way up to manager. But the demanding job left her with little time for her family, and what time she did have was usually spent preparing dinner and helping her children with their homework before they had to go to bed.

"I didn't want to get caught up in the tunnel-vision of work and lose my family," said Simpson, 41. "It's so easy to get lost in the shuffle."

So the Maryland native decided to quit her job, "but I was clueless about what I wanted to do next," she said.

Knowing she needed to bring in income to help support her family with her husband, she thought about opening a center for school-age children, a place where students could go after school to finish their homework, so they too could spend some quality time with their parents at night. The idea fit well with her education, as she had a bachelor's degree in elementary education from the University of Maryland.

"I wanted to give something back to working mothers," Simpson said. But she didn't know how to proceed.

She later talked with a friend, Will Moffett, who serves as the executive director of the Y.H. Thomas Community Center in Hampton. He suggested that she attend the city's Neighborhood College and wrote her a letter of recommendation so she would be accepted.



So she went and, from the first class, realized the program would provide her with the contacts as well as access to much of the information she needed to start a business.

Her goal was to take the knowledge she gathered from her contacts and apply it to her goal. "In my mind I'm always thinking, when I meet you, I want to know everything you know," she said. "It was important to me to take all the information I could get and redeposit it into the community."

When Simpson attended Neighborhood College, participants were required to do a variety of "homework," including researching their neighborhoods, touring other neighborhoods, and making contacts at City Hall and in local agencies.

The process was eye opening. "I didn't even know where City Hall was until I went to Neighborhood College," she said.

Through contacts she made at the Virginia Peninsula Chamber of Commerce, she connected with the Small Business Institute at Christopher Newport University in Newport News, where students in Dr. Stephanie Huneycutt's undergraduate class worked with her to develop a business plan and complete a market analysis.

In 1997, armed with this information, she opened a nonprofit youth development program, Inspiring Minds, in her home. She began with seven girls, including her two daughters, but the program quickly grew through word of mouth and now serves 63 students in kindergarten through eighth grade (although the program is open to students through high school).

Serving more children required more space, so Simpson eventually moved her program into the Y.H. Thomas Community Center. Six staff

"I didn't even know where City Hall was until I went to Neighborhood College."

— MICHELLE SIMPSON

Simpson credits the Neighborhood Initiative for empowering her and for motivating others to become involved in civic life.



and several volunteers now work with students, and a retired math teacher comes in to tutor twice a week. During the six years of the program, Inspiring Minds has worked with more than 350 students.

Despite its emphasis on homework, Simpson says that Inspiring Minds is more than a tutoring program. Students are taught job and social skills, through lessons as well as field trips. They regularly visit the courthouse, the police department, parks, museums and other work sites, where they get an inside look at how things operate, often through contacts Simpson made through Neighborhood College.

Taking a cue from the Neighborhood Initiative, Simpson has built partnerships with two local agencies that work with youth – Alternatives, Inc. and Kid Tech – and



the students participate in programs at these agencies at least once a week.

Having her own business has allowed Simpson to spend more time with her daughters, Carnai and Sharnell and her son, Thomas. It also has allowed her to nurture other children. “It makes me feel like a valuable part of Hampton,” she said.

Simpson credits the Neighborhood Initiative for empowering her and for motivating others to become involved in civic life. In addition to fostering confidence that neighborhoods can solve their own problems, the program provides access to the tools that citizens need to do something positive, if they see the need and have the inclination to become involved, she said.

“It’s priceless, as far as I’m concerned,” she said. “It’s like the kids I work with. They can grow up and be what they think they are now, or they can use the information we provide to be anything they want to be.”

Joan Kennedy, head of the Neighborhood Office, said Simpson herself is inspiring, not only to other neighborhood leaders, but to city officials as well.

“She took her Neighborhood College opportunity to a different place and a new level,” Kennedy said. “She grew our idea into something with a much greater potential. She gave us one of those magic moments when something becomes much greater than what it was originally planned to be.”

Simpson is confident that citizens in Hampton will continue



to be innovative in dealing with local problems as long as the Neighborhood Initiative is in place.

“Bad things happen all the time and we can choose to deal with them or ignore them,” she said. “In Hampton, we are willing to recognize a problem and come up with a solution ... The city makes it

possible for us to make a change (by saying to citizens): ‘Here we are. Here are some resources. What do you want to do with them?’

“The way I look at it, you can either be an ‘excuser’ (of problems) or an ‘executor,’ and I want to be someone who goes out and tries to fix problems.” ■





BAYSIDE PLAYGROUND
CHANGES ONE NEIGHBORHOOD
AND MANY MINDS

One day a few years ago, **AMY HOBBS** was reading the neighborhood plan for Buckroe Beach when a provision caught her eye. The city would provide the bayside neighborhood with recreation equipment, the plan said, and the words sparked in her a brainstorm.

“Why not a playground?” she thought.

Instead of asking the city to build a playground and waiting for the decision making process to move forward, Hobbs decided that the neighborhood, despite longtime struggles with crime and blight, should build one itself. So she and a few of her neighbors organized the Friends of Buckroe Beach Park, a subcommittee of her neighborhood organization, the Buckroe Civic Association, and set off to raise \$200,000.

Within two years, the committee had raised more than \$100,000 in cash and materials and secured a \$100,000 Neighborhood Improvement Grant from the city that required a 10 percent match, which Buckroe matched easily. After less than two years of fundraising and preparation, the 24,000-square foot S.S. Buckroe playground opened in spring 2003.

“This has been a true community effort, with neighborhoods, city departments, schools, churches, civic groups and the list goes on and on,”

said Hobbs, a mother of two who moved to Buckroe with her husband in 1991 and lives two blocks from the beach. “This is much more than a playground, it is the bottom rung in an infinite ladder of future possibilities for Buckroe and Hampton. And we are not done yet.”

Perhaps just as important to the neighborhood’s future, the project has helped to change the neighborhood’s relationship with city government, which had featured more suspicion than collaboration for years.

“People have done a 180-degree turn,” Hobbs said. “I think the majority of the people in the neighborhood now realize that the people (in city government) are there to help us. They are our partners and they don’t want to see Buckroe fail any more than we do.”

“There has been a real change in perception in how we can work together,” she said.

Joan Kennedy sees it, too. The director of Hampton’s Neighborhoods Office has worked in Hampton for two decades and had never seen in Buckroe the level of community involvement and cooperation with the city that exists today. The attitudes of many Buckroe residents seem to have changed, she said.

“This was an opportunity for city government to show the neighbor-

hood that we could have a different kind of relationship,” Kennedy said. “It also taught them that there was a different way of doing business and a value in community building.”

The playground is drawing families from throughout Hampton, harkening back to the days when Buckroe Beach was a regional attraction. The beach, located in northeastern Hampton along the Chesapeake Bay, was named after a town in England by French settlers who arrived in the 1600s to grow mulberry bushes. In 1883, a summer boarding house opened, the first step in Buckroe’s transformation into a resort destination.

The next year, a public bathhouse was built, and tourists were brought in on horse drawn carriages. In 1897, a local entrepreneur extended a trolley line to Buckroe and opened a hotel, dancing pavilion and amusement park that would draw tens of thousands of visitors to the neighborhood each year.

However, the neighborhood began to decline after the Hampton Roads Bridge Tunnel opened in 1957, improving access to larger waterfront areas in Norfolk and Virginia Beach. Tiny cottages and shanties that had served as summer homes in Buckroe were converted into low-rent housing, and the neighborhood began to experience increasing incidents of crime.





After the amusement park closed in 1985, the city purchased and dismantled it in 1989, creating acres of open space that many residents wanted to fill. Amy Hobbs was one.

Hobbs remembers when the Buckroe Civic Association put up wooden signs in 1998, welcoming visitors to the neighborhood. “I thought, what are we welcoming people to?” she said, recalling the prostitution and drug dealing she had witnessed near her home.⁷

Hobbs got involved in the civic association, first as a member of its crime watch, later in its fledgling efforts to get recreation equipment. It was during her work on the latter that Hobbs had her brainstorm and began to work aggressively to create the playground.

“I wouldn’t take ‘no’ for an answer,” she said.

It turned out that many in Buckroe shared her dream. Hobbs took the idea to the Hampton City Council, which approved the idea and agreed to designate land within Buckroe Park for the playground.

Hobbs’ subcommittee then set out to get as many people involved as possible, believing that a project built by the community would spur community pride. Many residents stepped forward to donate money and volunteer their time. Restaurants

and grocery stores donated food for fundraisers and the groundbreaking and dedication ceremonies. A firefighter who owned a paving company installed pavers that featured the names of donors.

Students from a nearby middle school worked with their families to spread tons of gravel and mulch on the site, and a carpentry class from a local school designed the fence that surrounds the playground and erected it with help from local Boy Scouts.

The work on the fence and playground surface offered opportunities for the neighborhood to build partnerships. Hobbs and her colleagues also worked closely with the Parks and Recreation Department.

The experience cemented the change in neighborhood attitudes and, through related efforts to reduce crime and enforce city codes, Buckroe has turned around.

“It’s hard to say when the tide turned, but I know there’s a difference in our area from five years ago,” Hobbs said. “It just happened. People got fed up with the problems in our neighborhood and started fighting back and realized the city could be a partner with us.”

The Buckroe situation is an example of a neighborhood project that, for one reason or another, took on a deeper importance than it

was initially intended to have, Kennedy said.

The playground project served as an opportunity for thousands of residents to get involved, when in the past, “getting a handful of volunteers to do any project in Buckroe was a challenge,” she said.

Although some people questioned the rationale for using neighborhood development funds on a project that would serve people throughout the city, Kennedy said the fact that it would create a good image of Buckroe in the minds of visitors connected it to the neighborhood’s revitalization efforts.

“A good image, we know, is one of the key factors in attracting new homeowners and investors,” she said. “Will this playground build image all by itself? No. But it surely is a nice start.” ■

¹ Osborne, David and Peter Plastrik. *Banishing Bureaucracy: The Five Strategies for Reinventing Government*. Reading, MA: Addison Wesley, 1997, p. 244.

² Osborne and Plastrik, p. 229.

³ Plotz, David A. *Community Problem Solving Case Summaries: Volume III*. Washington, DC: Program for Community Problem Solving, 1991, p. 36.

⁴ Coalition for Youth, *To Commit to the Future for Youth: Proposed Plan of Action*. Hampton, VA: City of Hampton, 1993, p23.

⁵ Excerpted from Osborne and Plastrik's *The Reinventor's Fieldbook: Practical Guidelines, Lessons and Resources for Revitalizing Schools, Public Services and Government Agencies at All Levels*.

⁶ "Journey to Excellence: YH Thomas Community Center Helps Hampton Win Praises," Hampton Roads Daily Press, June 11, 2002.

⁷ "Storming the Beach: In Buckroe, Pride Makes a Comeback," Hampton Daily Press, May 24, 2003.

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More information about the Hampton Neighborhood Initiative can be found at www.hampton.gov/neighborhoods or in the *Hampton Neighborhood Initiative — Lessons and Resources for Other Communities* by these same authors.



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