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Viewpoint

By Kathy Bailey, AICP

For decades, residents, local governments, and community development organizations have been working to stabilize and revitalize urban neighborhoods, only to see their gains threatened recently by rising foreclosure rates. As the downward spiral continues, housing values decline, property maintenance decreases, and neighborhood population drops, resulting in fewer customers for local businesses and a shrinking tax base.

To reverse this trend, we need a more strategic, holistic approach — what I call "robust revitalization." I chose this term because it suggests the vigor that is needed to achieve a healthy, vibrant neighborhood. For me, it is the culmination of 20 years of work with neighborhood stakeholders and colleagues in related professions. During this time, I have become convinced that the typical prescriptive, process-driven planning approach is not enough to bring about sustainable neighborhood change.

Like any planning process, robust revitalization has its own vision of the future. But it is more outcome driven than traditional planning. It is a holistic approach: context based, collaborative, comprehensive, equitable, and, therefore, more likely to bring about sustainable neighborhood change. It offers a framework for dealing with five key neighborhood elements: image, market forces, physical conditions, social conditions, and the ability of stakeholders to deal with neighborhood issues.

The robust revitalization approach is replicable in any neighborhood. It is already being used in communities such as Louisville, Kentucky; New Albany, Indiana; Hampton, Virginia; and Salt Lake City, Utah.

In Louisville, leaders of the California neighborhood used the robust model to improve neighborhood management. They organized a group called the California Collaborative, which encompasses nine diverse partners, including the New Directions Housing Corporation, a local NeighborWorks Network organization that serves as the operational partner; a nonprofit startup company; and a Fortune 500 company.

Recently, the collaborative presented a \$250,000 investment proposal to Louisville's Community Foundation to initiate several quick-start initiatives, ranging from creating the city's first wireless neighborhood to helping residents plant pocket gardens to organizing an ArtsReach network that will connect artists with neighborhood residents. The group's goal is

to turn the California neighborhood into a "green and wireless community with a vibrant arts beat."

The approach I am advocating focuses on the issues that are most in need of attention and then, with the collaboration of all the stakeholders, leads to informed decisions about needed steps. Most important, in light of the current foreclosure environment, the robust revitalization approach responds nimbly to the changing dynamics of the neighborhood. For example, to keep up the image and demand for a neighborhood, residents may park their cars in the driveways of vacant foreclosed properties or maintain the landscaping. They may also find new buyers or renters for vacant houses.

As an inclusive, outcome-driven endeavor, robust revitalization relies on diverse stakeholders to develop a vision of their neighborhood, set priorities, and track progress toward objectives. The stakeholders bring to the table an integrated approach to revitalization that includes solid neighborhood planning, entrepreneurial and strategic thinking, alignment with the neighborhood's values and culture, and a strong connection to the local power base. This approach assumes that every stakeholder is a resource and is interested in sharing information, making connections, and contributing to results in unique ways. These are some of the keys to neighborhood sustainability.

Through robust revitalization training at our institutes and place-based training in local communities, we are building a body of knowledge, a common language, and a set of best practices that can be adapted to communities around the country.

In the spirit of the Great Neighborhoods initiative that APA started last year, I encourage urban planners to consider robust revitalization as an approach that can help to bring about transformation in neighborhoods across the country.

Kathy Bailey is the community and neighborhood revitalization training manager for the NeighborWorks America training division in Washington, D.C.

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