



Dec. 2017

Useful Community Development... quick notes

This Month: When One Organization or Partnership Isn't Enough
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Moving Toward Solutions When Issues and Answers Are Not Readily Apparent

Often community problems and challenges resist technical definition, in which the problem definition and solutions are well known and agreed upon.

Common examples of challenges defying technical definition include gentrification, neighborhood decline, public education quality, a high crime rate, sprawl, neighborhood poverty or extreme poverty, and racial or ethnic conflict. In most of these cases, the coordinated action of several or a multitude of community groups, governments, non-profits, districts, and business interests may be required to make a significant impact on the situation. One group, no matter how large or powerful, cannot single-handedly make a major step forward.

The last few years have seen an effort to define and practice what is being called

collective impact. As explained by John Kania and Mark Kramer, this approach moves beyond partnerships and networks and is defined by these five characteristics:

1. A **common agenda** for social change, describing the significant movement that the participants would like to see.
2. A **shared system of measurement** so that the collective impact participants can understand whether progress is being made.
3. What they call **mutually reinforcing activities**, in which each organization undertakes the activities in which it excels and doesn't try to do everything.
4. **Abundant communication**, often evidenced through monthly or biweekly meetings of the top executives, with additional communication on an ongoing basis.
5. Identification of and agreement on a **backbone support organization**.

We think the backbone is the hardest concept to grasp. An organization that does not undertake its own programs within the scope of the collective impact agenda is essential to help bring administrative support, facilitation, accelerated communication, and one or more identified staff members to serve the collective impact project.

A suitable backbone might be a university, extension service, large multi-topic non-profit, national or state agency, faith-based organization, or even a corporation that has enough capacity to be able to devote a staff member to this effort. Just remember that you want the backbone to be able to support the shared goal wholeheartedly without inserting its own agenda into the mix.

The [pace-setting article](#) on this topic gives interesting examples in the form of Strive, a Cincinnati collective impact group focused on education; Elizabeth River Project, a water quality improvement initiative; and Shape Up Somerville, a childhood obesity project. Even those of you reading as a lone activist could distribute this article and ask for community dialogue on its applicability to what now seems to be an intractable problem.

We wish you and your family a peaceful, abundant, and happy new year, connected to community, to friends, to nature.

We'll be back in January. In the meantime, if your community organization needs New Year's tips, see [last December's newsletter](#).

New Website Content This Month: This month we posted our interview with Randy Rodgers, Executive Editor and Publisher for Sustainable City

Network, on the [trends he sees in sustainable cities](#). This will kick off a series on climate change and extreme weather challenges. We also asked landscape architect Jay Womack of Huff and Huff about a big idea that goes beyond sustainability, which he calls [regenerative design](#). Besides that big concept, this article contains some practical food for thought for homeowners. Speaking of landscape, we also talked with Ian Leahy of American Forests about how a community can cultivate its valuable [tree canopy](#). Lastly we posted a new article in which we chatted with Autumn Boos of Midwest Floating Island about using [floating islands](#) to clean backyard, stormwater, or wastewater ponds. Editors answered one visitor's question, on [how to get the city to enforce the zoning ordinance](#).

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