

Partners in Progress Case Study: Neighborhood Housing Services of South Florida

In 2009 the Miami-Dade County Commission declared the 79th Street Corridor a Community Redevelopment Area (CRA). The CRA designation was the first indication that the county acknowledged the decades-long decline in the neighborhoods surrounding this two mile thoroughfare between the cities of Miami and Hialeah. In all, the CRA covers three and a half square miles. The county's declaration caused its planning department to issue a Community Redevelopment Plan the following year.

Eric Burnside remembers going to a public meeting about the plan. A long-time resident of the neighborhood, Burnside was unimpressed. "People who live within the [CRA] boundaries were not involved [in the plan's preparation] but the people who lived outside the boundaries were." Emphasizing the disregard of the corridor's residents, Burnside added, "This started long before the '70s and goes back to everything I have experienced as a child and growing up: the system of exclusion."

Neighborhood Housing Services of South Florida (NHSSF) had long identified the 79th Street Corridor community as one in desperate need of stabilization and reinvestment. A member of the NeighborWorks® network, NHSSF is a well-established community development organization that delivers a spectrum of housing related services and supports community building. Decades of official neglect and racial segregation, however, created significant barriers to improvements around the 79th Street corridor. Then, in late 2013, Citi Foundation and the Low Income Investment Fund selected NHSSF to receive one of 14 Partners in Progress (PIP) grants to serve as a "community quarterback." The grant provided an opportunity to catalyze the corridor's redevelopment and to test the efficacy of the new community quarterback model of neighborhood development.

The Neighborhood: "There Is No There There"

Community quarterbacks emphasize the need to include residents in all aspects of the community development process. Moreover, they start with the assumption that only comprehensive cross-sector, people- and place-based approaches can address the complex circumstances that cause disinvestment, failing schools, health disparities and similar conditions associated with chronically distressed neighborhoods. It is essential, therefore, that quarterback organizations build a broad partnership of organizations, institutions, neighborhood residents and governmental agencies. Achieving such cooperation across systems is an enormous challenge in and of itself. NHSSF faced three distinctive hurdles initially:

- It had to engage with and win the trust of residents, like Burnside, who had been excluded and seen promised redevelopment efforts evaporate as quickly as they were announced.

- Unlike most PIP grantees who serve well-recognized neighborhoods such as Brownsville in Brooklyn or Little Tokyo in Los Angeles, NHSSF's challenge included a further complication: the CRA boundaries did not conform to any generally recognized neighborhood. Instead, it was carved out of portions of the Arcola Lakes, Model City, Gladeview, Liberty City and West Little River neighborhoods.
- Finally, the 79th Street neighborhood is not even part of a municipality. It sits in the unincorporated void surrounding Miami-Dade County's planetary system of self-governing municipalities that includes Miami, Hialeah and 32 other local jurisdictions. Yet, almost half of the County's 2.6 million population resides in unincorporated areas, making the NW 79th Street CRA's 20,000 residents, according to Arden Shank, NHSSF's long-time president and CEO, "a tiny drop in the bucket" that must struggle to get the attention of governmental officials.

The corridor's unfamiliar boundaries and the lack of municipal government led NHSSF's Arden Shank to observe, "There is no there there." Shank continues:

There is no city government we can go to. This area is split between two county commission districts out of thirteen; we occupy only a small portion of those two districts. And county government is huge. It is one of the largest employers in South Florida. If I were to walk into the County Mayor's office now he probably won't know we exist. But my colleagues in Chicago and LA have significant relationships with elected and appointed officials in their city government....The whole political arrangement militates against success.

The CRA declaration and the boundaries drawn around NW 79th Street originated with one of NHSSF's sister organizations, the 79th Street Corridor Neighborhood Initiative, Inc., not with county government. Frustrated with the lack of effort to revitalize the area NHSSF and two other nonprofit organizations, the Urban League of Greater Miami and the Dade Employment and Economic Development Corporation, formed the Initiative ten years before the county's CRA designation. The Initiative's goal is to transform the three and a half square mile community surrounding the corridor "from a fragmented set of residential, commercial, and industrial sites with a reputation as dangerous and undesirable into a cohesive neighborhood conscious of its...assets and directing its future." NHSSF, which serves two massive South Florida counties, Miami-Dade and Broward, had identified the corridor as one of a few target areas where it focused its organizational resources and energies. For that reason, it helped form the Initiative in 1999.

While NHSSF received the Citi's PIP grant, the 79th Street Corridor Neighborhood Initiative functions as "co-quarterback." Shank describes tailoring the quarterback model to the unique circumstances and capabilities that exist in this community. That meant working as co-quarterbacks with the Neighborhood Initiative. This team combined NHSSF's housing and community development experience with the Initiative's knowledge of this particular neighborhood and its role in securing the county's CRA designation for it.

The Initiative commissioned the very first planning study for the corridor in 2001. Two

more studies in 2003 and 2004 highlighted the same challenges and opportunities cited in the first report. Yet it wasn't until 2009 that the county, with the Initiative's prodding, created the CRA. The county's 2010 CRA plan affirmed the themes of the earlier reports. Nonetheless, no action ensued. By default, therefore, the PIP grant enabled NHSSF to assume a catalytic role. It formed a steering committee that eventually included representatives from 36 organizations, businesses and government agencies to formulate a community-level agenda for revitalizing the NW 79th Street Corridor.

The Challenge

While jurisdictional and geographic issues created challenges for NHSSF as a community development quarterback, there is a powerful economic logic to gathering the residential, commercial, and industrial areas on either side of NW 79th Street. The Action Plan NHSSF developed with its partners during the first year of PIP funding notes:

The 79th Street Corridor's central location to employment and manufacturing centers; inventory of valuable and underutilized industrial land;...particularly along key transportation and commercial corridors; and extensive transit and rail infrastructure are a few of the assets rarely found elsewhere.

While the Interstate Highway system siphons some traffic from NW 79th Street, also known as Florida State Road 934, it remains a major east-west thoroughfare. It contains a great deal of vacant and underutilized land on the eastern edge, right where it abuts the border with the densely-developed City of Miami. Greater Miami's proximity to Latin America and the Caribbean, moreover, makes the region an important center of international trade. The land along NW 79th Street targeted by NHSSF for its PIP-funded activities is just miles northeast of Miami International Airport and northwest of the Port of Miami, the 11th largest container port in the United States. It is also rich in transportation infrastructure. The Metrorail rapid transit system has 3 stops in the neighborhood. It is also served by Tri-Rail, a three county commuter rail system. Amtrak's East Coast line terminates in the neighborhood. Moreover the industrial portion of the corridor is served by Florida East Coast Railway's freight service which connects up with South Florida's busy ports and other national freight systems.

One important lesson from the last half century of community development activities is that physical revitalization is far more likely to succeed when there is a robust regional economy, and neighborhoods can connect to it. If community developers can connect residents to employment opportunities throughout the region, it provides the foundation for equally robust people-based community development strategies. In those more prosperous locales, instead of facing a headwind of disinvestment, the market provides an invigorating tailwind. The NW 79th St. Corridor's nearness to Miami and its airport; its developable land and its transportation infrastructure, attest to the compelling rationale for treating the neighborhoods abutting this thoroughfare as a coherent economic development target.

There are, however, additional historic and legacy reasons for focusing on the corridor. The area developed rapidly following the World War II and became a stable middle-class African American neighborhood. In 1959 the intersection of NW 79th Street and 27th Avenue became a major retail hub with the opening of the Northside Shopping Center – one of South Florida’s first – anchored by a Sears Roebuck department store. It sits at the center of the CRA. LaTonda James, NHSSF’s community building manager, grew up in the neighborhood and remembers the “movie theater across the street from the Northside Shopping Center and the drive-in theater just two blocks north of it.” According to James “That intersection was the epicenter of Black Miami.”

The neighborhood’s liveliness eroded after the civil unrest that followed the acquittal of four Miami-Dade police officers in the beating death of Arthur McDuffie, an African-American insurance executive, in 1980. Sears and other businesses either decided not to rebuild or abandoned the neighborhood. The theater and drive-in that James remembers from her childhood are long gone. With the continuing process of disinvestment middle class blacks moved to Broward County. Homes began to deteriorate along with the vitality of the commercial sector. In the quarter century that followed, little was done to reverse the tide. Today the corridor’s population continues to decline and is estimated to have fallen below 20,000. Two-thirds of the residents are African-American or Haitian. Per capita income for the CRA is \$13,142, almost half of that for the county as a whole.

Building a Collaborative

With the award of the PIP grant Arden Shank, along with Ron Butler of the 79th Street Corridor Neighborhood Initiative, Inc., began to reach out to neighborhood organizations, regional institutions and Miami-Dade County officials as they pulled together a steering committee to spearhead a renewed drive to revitalize the 79th Street CRA area. Having NHSSF emerge as the quarterback with the resources to drive a revitalization effort, Butler reported that “organizations that had not previously participated in planning processes” began to gravitate to this effort, “most notably the Beacon Council, an economic development arm of the County Commission.” Butler continued:

Having the Beacon Council, which is like the Chamber [of Commerce elsewhere], raised the profile of the effort. A lot more community groups that were operating independently came together under one roof. That had never happened before – the public and private sectors working together toward the same goals.

These partners formed a steering committee that met monthly for the purpose of developing an implementation plan to revitalize the corridor. Initially though the most important part of the process was breaking down silos and building bridges. Those representing “government agencies admitted that they had never worked with a neighborhood on a specific set of projects,” according to Shank, “and many of the community agencies did not know about each other even though they had worked in the same community for years.”

This group, in turn, met quarterly with a “stakeholder’s group” of interested residents to report on their activities and collect feedback from the community. The steering committee commissioned an economic, market and strategic planning study to gain a better fix on the most feasible activities to incorporate into their implementation plan. The latter document, known as the “Community Action Plan” and prepared by an arm of the South Florida Regional Planning Council became the Steering Committee’s implementation blueprint. With its publication the Steering Committee adopted a new name – “the 79th Street Coalition for Change” – to highlight its commitment to transforming the corridor and its members subdivided into four Action Groups:

- Housing and Supportive Services
- Health, Safety and Quality of Life
- Community Engagement and Education
- Economic Development and the Built Environment

The plan is to focus on four leverage points in the corridor. The first is to brand the neighborhood to project a positive and coherent sense of the community. The coalition has adopted a logo and prepared banners to be erected on light poles at the “gateway” to NW 79th Street, where it intersects with NW 7th Avenue so that travelers driving west out of the City of Miami on NW 79th Street will understand they have entered an identifiable neighborhood. Another set of banners will mark the gateway for travelers from the east. The hope is that this branding will help instill a perception that this is a coherent neighborhood with untapped economic potential.

Another target of opportunity is a twelve block residential neighborhood along NW 18th Avenue. It is a residential neighborhood with numerous vacant lots, a poorly maintained pocket park and a few corner stores. It is also a route young children walk daily to reach schools at either end of the corridor. The coalition’s Housing and Supportive Services Action Group has helped launch a first-time homebuyers club and has been accompanying the county commissioner on monthly walks through the neighborhood to identify needs. They have scored a couple of quick victories. The county followed through with improvements to the Broadway Park and a grant allowed another organizational partner to recruit volunteers to plant 100 trees in and around the corridor and at the local elementary school.

The central commercial intersection at NW 79th Street and 27th Avenue where the Northside Shopping Center sits is a third site slated for improvement. Business owners are being canvassed about their interest in establishing a business improvement district.

To advance the jobs and economic development agenda, the coalition has targeted the Poinciana Industrial Park. In addition to the existing businesses and good rail access, the area includes significant county owned land that could accommodate new and expanded businesses. The economic development Action Group is in conversations with a manufacturer of modular housing about locating there and is promoting a Free Trade Zone to spur job growth.

Resident Engagement

Each Action Group is co-chaired by a community resident and a representative of an organization or agency with relevant substantive competencies. A member of NHSSF's staff serves as a liaison to each group, helping to schedule meetings, coordinate activities among the Action Groups and provide other support. The co-chairs, in turn, meet once a month to ensure that the all parts of the Coalition are making satisfactory progress.

At a recent meeting of the co-chairs the Community Engagement and Education Action Group reported among other things about the team's emphasis on employment and, more specifically, their conversations with Miami-Dade College about certificate programs offered at the North Campus in high labor demand fields including entrepreneurship, computer repair, graphic design and accounting. Marvin Weeks, an artist and resident of the 18th Avenue corridor, one of the focal points for the Coalition's Health, Safety and Quality of Life Action group updated the co-chairs on their recruitment of volunteers to paint murals. "We are trying to engage the community in the mural project," he reported, "to transform and give another image of the neighborhood." The Housing Action Group updated the co-chairs on the first meeting of its newly organized homebuyers club and preliminary plans to use credit scores to determine its effectiveness and the group's longer term struggle to address infrastructure barriers to infill housing construction to cope with the vacant lots along 18th Avenue.

Eric Burnside gave the report for the Built Environment and Economic Opportunity Action Group. Not surprisingly, Burnside, who had been so incensed by the lack of resident input into the county's CRA plan for the corridor, was a regular at the Coalition's quarterly stakeholder meetings at the early stages of that collaborative's planning. He would sit in the back of the room, listen, and sometimes ask questions. "Neighborhood Housing reached out to me on a personal level by the way they were operating and what they were saying," Burnside explains.

It made me think that what they were doing might be an opportunity to bring about effective change. I made it my business to keep a close watch and ear on what Neighborhood Housing had to say.

Shank and Burnside were apparently sizing each other up. Burnside's assessment of Shank suggests the type of attention required to build trust with residents of the community, many of whom feel excluded when non-residents assume leadership of a neighborhood change process.

I observed Arden Shank from the beginning. Even when he doesn't appear to be paying attention, he doesn't miss it, even if he makes no comments. He brings it up later...When he talks to me he looks me straight in the eye and speaks...It makes sense. His facial expression and eyes say the same thing that comes out of his mouth. That's why I think this is a chance for effective change.

Shank remembers a conversation with Burnside as a stakeholder meeting was about to convene. “I said, ‘You ought to be sitting at the table.’ But he took a seat in the back as usual. When I turned around later, he had taken a seat at the table.” He has been at the table ever since, now co-chairing the Built Environment and Economic Opportunity Action Group with the Beacon Council’s vice president, Sheri-Colas-Gervais. Ron Butler, NHSSF’s “co-quarterback” from the NW 79th Street Initiative serves as that committee’s staff liaison. The action group is focused on creating a Free Trade Zone in the hope that it will stimulate growth among the manufacturers in the Poinciana Industrial Park, creating new jobs and spurring ancillary business activity in the retail and housing sectors.

Meanwhile LaTonda James, the staff liaison to the Education and Community Engagement Action Group, and Rachel Walker reported on work of that committee, which includes residents of Northpark at Scott Carver, a large HOPE VI development that replaced two public housing projects. As Northpark’s residents service coordinator Walker knows many of the tenants. She and James recruited six residents to participate in a NeighborWorks® leadership development program. The group spent a long weekend in Louisville and returned committed to starting a walking club to strengthen the social bonds among residents and promote healthier lifestyles.

Lessons for Community Development Quarterbacks

Below are the lessons that can be gleaned from NHSSF’s efforts as a community quarterback to build a cross-sector coalition to revitalize the NW 79th Street Corridor.

A community quarterback can help pull together residents and key organizations into an effective coalition

Fragmentation is a barrier to development in many communities. The quarterback model addresses this barrier to community revitalization. The Urban Land Institute convened a Technical Assistance Panel to make recommendations about the development of the 79th Street Corridor just as Citi announced its PIP grant to NHSSF. In its report the panel wrote:

The 79th Street Corridor has been the focus of numerous plans and committed organizations and community leaders. Taking the next step in improving the corridor and bringing jobs and new economic investments to the corridor will require that the relevant organizations come together and work toward a shared plan. They also need to speak with one unified voice when communicating the assets of the corridor and speaking to public officials, funders, and the development community.

A major boost in unifying the voices and places along the corridor is the recent announcement of a Citi Foundation...grant to Neighborhood Housing Services of South Florida (NHSSF)...The initiative will work to advance...a quarterback model of community development by building the capacity of trusted organizations that align their resources, objectives, and efforts.

After two years it is apparent that the quarterback model was precisely what this neighborhood needed to move beyond decades of reports and inaction. While it is too soon to conclude that NHSSF's vision of "a vibrant, safe, and economically sustainable community with rising incomes and property values that is attractive to families of mixed incomes, businesses, and entrepreneurs" will be realized, there is convincing evidence that progress is being made.

Building a Cross Sector Coalition is Labor Intensive

Being a quarterback makes heavy demands on the time of the organization's staff, especially senior leaders because it involves strategic relationship building. As a result, the Citi Foundation funding was essential to NHSSF's capacity to serve as the corridor's quarterback. NHSSF buttressed its capacity by serving as co-quarterback with its sister organization, the 79th Street Corridor Neighborhood Initiative.

Trust and Respect are a Quarterback's Indispensable Currency

Arden Shank has the personal qualities required to build trust and cooperation across barriers. He has worked in the community for almost 15 years. He not only led NHSSF during that period, he helped organize and served on the boards of the South Florida Community Development Coalition, the 79th Street Corridor Neighborhood Initiative and the Community Reinvestment Alliance of South Florida. Shank earned a reputation for placing NHSSF's mission above organizational self-interest. Moreover, in his quiet way, he reached out to people, listened carefully and has been unfailingly inclusive.

The Promise of Working in an Integrated Way

The 79th Street Coalition for Change is still young. Nonetheless, it has brought disparate interests to the table to revitalize an area that has been largely ignored for decades. It has won the attention and cooperation of resident leaders, the business community, numerous nonprofit organizations and representatives from a number of departments of the Miami-Dade County government and the Florida Department of Transportation.

The Coalition has provided a structure that has enabled residents to assume leadership positions in guiding the development agenda. This has legitimacy to the Community Action Plan and created a virtuous cycle of inter-organizational cooperation.

The Coalition's Community Action Plan has in fact been used as the blueprint for the efforts of the four Action Groups during the past year so that complementary initiatives are moving along in parallel. As a result, the efforts of many organizations are coordinated and producing better results.

The work of NHSSF and its partners in the 79th Street Coalition for Change has been able to successfully overcome a key challenge to improving the Corridor. From 2001 until the start of the PIP Initiative, four planning studies were completed but few if any of the

recommendations were implemented. Why? In large part, as the Urban Land Institute noted, because there was no unified voice speaking for the neighborhood and taking action to help ensure the recommendations were implemented. NNSF and its partners have been able to overcome this challenge and create a coalition that has strong resident participation as well as representation from key organizations critical for planning and implementation. The key steps on the way to this achievement:

Gain trust and engagement of residents

NHSSF and its partners reached out to community residents, encouraged them to participate in the coalition meetings, developed a governance structure that is co-led by residents, and provide leadership training for residents.

Get the right organizations to the table

Because the 79th Street corridor sits in an unincorporated part of a large county and is part of multiple jurisdictions, getting the right players to the table was challenging. But by consistent, persistent work in helping all key organizations understand how participating in the coalition can help them achieve objectives important to them, NHSSF and its partners were able to slowly and steadily build a coalition that include key organizations required for planning and implementation.

Build a commitment to a shared vision and action plan

NHSSF and its partners took the time needed to allow the Coalition members to determine the scope and focus of the market study, fully digest its findings and recommendations, develop an action plan with short, medium and long-term goals and gain commitments from Coalition members to take specific actions to implement the plan. The work on the action plan is still relatively young, and so the progress that has been made is modest. Nonetheless, the Coalition has made concrete achievements including:

Creating a sense of place

The logo and tagline for the gateway banners have been designed and are now in the process of being sited.

Gathering and reporting meaningful data

The coalition includes three universities that are engaged in providing hands-on advice and guidance in choosing the right indicators, data sources, and data collection methodologies

Home ownership

NHSSF has reactivated lending and brokering activities suspended during the recession and, in partnership with OneUnited Bank, the nation's largest black-owned bank, has launched homebuyer training.

Small business

The coalition has begun a small business lending program and is planning a business improvement district.

Residents

A group of residents has participated in NeighborWorks' leadership training program and community residents are co-chairing each of the Action Groups.

Active discussions with housing manufacturer and food processing plant

To spur growth in the industrial area and generate more jobs, the Coalition is working with a housing manufacturer interested in locating in the neighborhood and detail planning on a foreign trade zone is likely to enable an existing food processor to expand production.

But the simple fact that there is a group of residents and key organizations engaged, advocating and pursuing implementation for the first time in many decades is perhaps the most promising sign of future improvements for the 79th Street Corridor community.

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