

A Review of Community Planning Programs

Across Texas:

El Paso, San Antonio, and Fort Worth

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Executive Summary

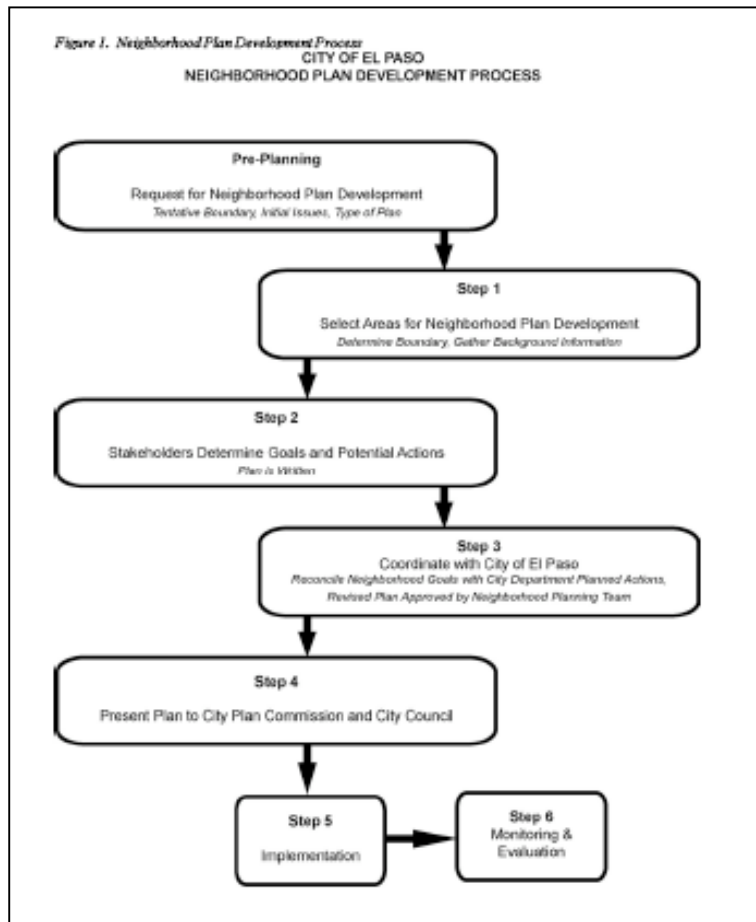
The following report reviews neighborhood planning programs in El Paso, San Antonio, and Fort Worth. Each of the programs is assessed in terms of implementation, results, and process. The report found that both El Paso and San Antonio have similar neighborhood planning programs while Fort Worth is quite unique.

Of the three cities studied, El Paso's *Neighborhoods Matter!* Plan is the youngest. The program, which was started in 2004, has successfully processed four neighborhood plans. El Paso neighborhood plans include, infrastructure, land use, and implementation strategies. To assist in the planning process the city offers community groups a template to follow. In addition to the template neighborhood planners are assigned to provide technical assistance to the groups. Currently, the City's program is being redesigned to improve implementation.

San Antonio's plan follows a similar model to El Paso's program. One key difference is San Antonio uses three levels of plans: neighborhood, community, and perimeter. Additionally, another difference between San Antonio and El Paso is San Antonio's program includes more provisions to assist implementation including, small grants, and an indicator system.

Fort Worth has the most advanced neighborhood planning program. The program has been well received because of its structure and competitive nature. Each year, up to three neighborhoods compete for a \$1.2 million grant. When awarded, the grant goes towards implementation of the plan.

El Paso



Starting in 2004, El Paso is relatively new to neighborhood planning. The City's neighborhood planning program, titled *Neighborhoods Matter! Fostering Community Pride* was established with the assistance of Americorps. Under the Vista program that ran from May 2003 to November 2004, Americorps volunteers worked with El Paso neighborhood planners in an outreach campaign to

promote neighborhood planning within El Paso's empowerment zone. By the end of the campaign, ten neighborhood associations were created; that number has now grown to over sixty registered associations¹.

In addition to outreach, capacity building was another objective of the Vista program. Members of the newly formed associations were offered workshops in dispute resolution, working with elected officials, and conducting successful meetings. Throughout the campaign, Americorps volunteers acted as liaisons between the City and the associations. Volunteers were available for "hands-on" technical assistance for associations, regardless of location. Adopted in 2004, the Chihuahuita Neighborhood Plan was the first neighborhood plan passed by the City of El Paso. Since then, three additional plans have been approved.

¹ <http://www.elpasotexas.gov/neighborhood/reports.asp>

To facilitate the process, the City has created a neighborhood planning template (figure 1) intended to be used by neighborhood stakeholders, planners, and elected officials. The primary purpose of the template is to introduce neighborhood groups to the planning process and create uniformity. The document outlines the stages of creating a neighborhood plan from identification of plan boundaries to presenting the final plan to City Council. In general, the scope of the neighborhood plans is large. Plans include land use, zoning, transportation, infrastructure, and implementation strategies.

Process

Of the six steps illustrated in figure 1, the neighborhood groups are involved in the first four. In the pre planning stage, the neighborhood group applies with the City to start the planning process. The City then reviews the merit of each applicants, groups with a demonstrated need are given top priority.

Once the groups have been chosen, the planning begins. Firstly, plan boundaries are defined and a planning team is formed. Ideally, the planning team is a representative sample of the population found within the plan area. For most of the process, the planners work with the planning team to create the plan. The planning team then reports back to the public at large on their progress. During the yearlong process, there are a total of three public meetings, two of which are facilitated by the planning team.

Once the planning team has been created they begin the planning phase by identifying key issues and goals the plan should tackle. City Planners assist in the analysis by leading neighborhood groups through a process called SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats). The SWOT analysis helps the stakeholder groups to identify the issues goals and objectives that the plan should tackle.

These issues and goals make up the basis of the draft plan. At the second public meeting the planning teams present the draft plan and issues they have identified. The public then has the opportunity to give feedback to the planning team.

During the third phase the planning team works with the neighborhood planner to draft a Municipal Action Strategy (MAS). The MAS identifies the top priorities of the plan and means of implementation available. During this step the planning team works with various City departments to reconcile differences in priorities create compromises

that will work for both the City and Neighborhood. Finally, in step four, the plan is taken first to the CPC for approval. Depending on the CPC's comments the document will go before the City Council for approval.

Relationship

For the neighborhood planning process to run smoothly City officials should work closely with the community. The City of El Paso provides guidance to neighborhood associations through the use of the planning template and a planning handbook. The handbook discusses a variety of basic meeting facilitation techniques. In addition to these documents, the City has five neighborhood planners. These planners work closely with neighborhood associations to guide them through the planning process. According to El Paso's Neighborhood Planning template, "The staff's role is to facilitate reasonable and equal participation from all interested groups in the neighborhood, document input and to gather additional information for plan development.²"

While the neighborhood planners act as liaisons for the neighborhood associations, a review mechanism also exists in the form of the City Plan Commission (CPC). The CPC has executive decision over all of the neighborhood group plans and decisions. For example, the CPC determines if groups qualify as neighborhood groups and are eligible for the neighborhood planning process. The CPC also prioritizes which areas receive planning funds. Finally, the CPC reviews plans drafted by the communities for approval.

Judging from the documents that discuss El Paso's neighborhood planning process, the working relationship between neighborhoods and the City is limited. The neighborhood planners are the primary contact point between the two entities.

Implementation

After the neighborhood plan has been adopted by the City Council step five of the neighborhood planning process as begun, implementation. According to the template document, "They [Neighborhood Plans] are guidance documents, not laws or fiscal

² Neighborhood Plan Development Process. April 12, 2005. Planning Department. City of El Paso. P. 8.

promises. In the case of the Municipal Action Strategy, by adopting it the City is only obligated to use it as a guide when making other, legally binding, decisions.³ In theory, the neighborhood plans are implemented through zoning ordinances, and inclusion in the City's Capital Improvement Program (CIP).

Results

Over the past two years El Paso has successfully passed three neighborhood plans. Additionally, several neighborhoods plans are in the development stages. To assess the success of the El Paso's neighborhood planning process I spoke with Bill Lilly, Neighborhood services manager for the City. According to Mr. Lilly, the program has been successful in mobilizing neighborhood stakeholder groups. Unfortunately, these plans have become "shelf documents" because implementation has been difficult.

Under the current process, neighborhood groups are responsible for implementation strategies. According to Lilly, this has been ineffective because neighborhood groups are not aware of potential costs of implementation; plans are not realistic in what is economically feasible. The City is currently redesigning the neighborhood planning process to improve implementation. Lilly feels that by increased coordination between city officials and neighborhood planning groups more successful plans will come in the future.

San Antonio

San Antonio neighborhood planning program is quite similar to El Paso's, only older and more structured. Currently, over sixty neighborhood plans are active within the city. The current planning program titled *Community Building and Neighborhood Planning Program* (CBNP) was created in 1998. The program was created as a result of San Antonio's 1997 master plan which set two neighborhood related goals:

Goal 1: Preserve, protect and enhance the integrity, economic viability, and livability of San Antonio's neighborhoods.

Goal 2: Strengthen the use of the neighborhood planning process and neighborhood

³ Neighborhood Plan Development Process. April 12, 2005. Planning Department. City of El Paso. P. 13.

*plans*⁴.

The CBNP model created three planning levels: neighborhood, community, and perimeter; each of which includes land use, community facilities and transportation network components. The neighborhood plans, which acts as building blocks for the community plans, are used to focus on areas of approximately 1 square mile, 4,000 to 10,000 residents, or 1500 homes. Community plans include enough population to support a middle or high school, between 20,000 and 60,000 residents⁵. San Antonio is divided into twenty-five community plan areas. Finally, perimeter plans serve areas currently in the City's ETJ. Perimeter plans are intended to coincide with major transportation and annexation decisions. Although these plans are not legally binding, they are designed to promote capacity building within communities. The plans act as a guide for the city, identifying time frames, priorities, and potential funding sources. Additionally, they act as a marketing tool by creating a vision for the area. In theory, these three sets of plans combine to create a citywide comprehensive plan.

Process

San Antonio's neighborhood planning process is similar to El Paso's in both time frame and structure. Usually, the neighborhood plans take between nine months to a year to complete during which a series of three public meetings are held. The CBNP breaks this process into two phases: plan development by neighborhood and plan review and approval by City.

Before the planning process begins in earnest the groups must submit an application to the City. Because of limited resources, the City cannot assist every neighborhood group that wants a plan. The application process is used to identify the strongest groups showing enough involvement to support the planning process. Once the City has selected groups to work with, the Planning department hosts the first of three public meetings in the neighborhood. During the meeting, participants are introduced to the planning process and planning teams are selected. The planning teams are a core group of stakeholders from the neighborhood that do the bulk of the planning. Following

⁴ <http://www.sanantonio.gov/planning/pdf/neighborhoods/cbnp.pdf>

⁵ http://www.sanantonio.gov/planning/neighborhoods/planning_basics.asp

the first meeting, the planning team works with the City's Neighborhood planners to identify goals and objectives for the plan. After the team has agreed upon the goals, they present the results in the second public meeting. At this point the public has a chance to comment on the goals and objectives and priorities of the future plan. Once these details have been ironed out the planning team moves on to production phase of the plan. The third meeting is the public's opportunity to give feedback on the plan that the planning team has created. Once the feedback from this meeting has been integrated into the plan, phase one is complete.

During phase two, the plan is reviewed by the Planning Commission, City departments, and City manager. In order to be approved, the plan must be consistent with the City's goals and existing plans. Once these groups have given their approval the plan goes before the City Council. If the plan is approved by the City Council it is then distributed to elected officials and city departments for implementation.

Implementation

The CBNP aims to strengthen neighborhood plans through incentives, zoning, land use and implementation. Although the plans serve solely as guides and are not legally binding, elements of these plans are brought to fruition through several avenues. Firstly, elements of the plan are addressed in the capital budgeting process. Secondly, several grants ranging from \$250 to \$10,000 are available to neighborhood groups to aid implementation. In addition to grants, evaluation is also used. To measure the progress towards implementing the goals of each plan, 'urban indicators' are used. These include both qualitative and quantitative measurements. Every two years a report is produced which summarizes the progress towards goals.

Results

San Antonio's neighborhood planning program has been met with mixed success. Currently, almost a third of the city is covered by an adopted neighborhood, community or perimeter plan. Unfortunately, no comprehensive plan exists to tie them all together.

Additionally, the City has difficulty implementing the existing plans⁶. Part of the difficulty has been credited to a lack of planning staff. According to the City's website three of the City's eleven planning positions are currently empty⁷.

Fort Worth

Fort Worth uses a planning model quite different from San Antonio and El Paso. Instead of neighborhood planning, Fort Worth relies largely on a comprehensive planning model. The comprehensive plan, which is updated annually, includes a neighborhood planning component. The centerpiece for the City's neighborhood planning program is the award winning *Model Block* (MB) Program.

Since 1997, the number of Fort Worth neighborhood associations has grown from 114 to 217. Although many of these associations would like plans, the City does not have the resources to assist them all. In an effort to focus the City's efforts, the *Model Blocks Program* was created. Under the program, the City assists up to three neighborhoods a year in creating a comprehensive plan for a ten-block area within their boundaries. One of the three neighborhoods is selected as the 'Model Block' and is then awarded a \$1.2 million dollar grant to implement its plan. The grants, which are distributed over a two-year period, are federally funded by Community Development Block Grants (CDBG) and Home Investment Partnership Program money. The neighborhoods not awarded grant money are assisted in identifying other funding sources for implementation.

Process – The actual planning process is structured similarly to both San Antonio and El Paso's neighborhood planning programs. Neighborhood associations are formed and boundaries are defined as a first step. Secondly, the association applies to the planning department to enter the program. The City then accepts the strongest neighborhood groups which show the most potential. Once the groups are selected, neighborhood planners lead them through the SWOT (strength, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis, and the visioning processes. Additionally, planners assist the neighborhoods in asset based planning and creating a budget for the potential \$1.2 million grant. Elements

⁶ Solis Zenon. Planner II City of San Antonio. Phone interview 2/28/06.

⁷ http://www.sanantonio.gov/planning/neighborhoods/contacting_us.asp

of the plans include a vision statement, goals, and implementation strategies. Projects proposed in the neighborhood comprehensive plans cover housing, infrastructure and community facilities, economic development, public services, and neighborhood capacity building. After the allotted nine months for plan creation, the neighborhood groups present their final drafts to senior City staff that acts as a selection committee. The winning group is chosen based on their plan, their presentation and a site visit.

Implementation. Neighborhood plans are implemented through several avenues including the Model Block Grant, public private partnerships, and leveraging grant funds. Firstly, the plan can be directly implemented with the Model Block Grants. Approximately half of this grant is earmarked for home improvements including rehabilitation and infill projects. Public private partnerships are also fostered through the program. Neighborhood groups are encouraged to work with area groups including developers, nonprofits, churches, banks, and government agencies to achieve the goals of the plan. Finally, neighborhood groups have successfully leveraged grant money with additional funds from outside sources.

Results – Since the program’s inception in 1993, fourteen neighborhood groups have received funding. Of those, ten have become community development corporations and have continued to be active in the enhancement of their area. In regards to capacity building, the plan has been successful. The American Planning Association has recognized the success of the program; in 2002 the APA awarded Fort Worth with the Opportunity and Empowerment Award. According to the APA, “The participants [of the Model Block Program] have seen their plans bring about improved housing stock, increased home ownership, lower crime rates, job training, employment opportunities, and greater private sector investment in their neighborhoods. The Model Blocks Program has strengthened bonds between neighbors, as well as between the city's residents and leaders, and has greatly improved the quality of life for many people in Fort Worth⁸.”

⁸ American Planning Association. March 20, 2002. Fort Worth’s Neighborhood Program Wins Award. <http://www.planning.org/newsreleases/2002/ftp0320.htm>

Conclusion. In conclusion, each of the three neighborhood programs shares commonalities. These include the basic time frame and process neighborhood groups follow. In each city, groups form and identify their boundaries as a first step. Once the City has recognized them, they must apply to take part in the neighborhood planning program. In each city far more neighborhood associations without plans than with plans exists. In many cases, a neighborhood association may be comprised of a small number of individuals who simply want to be notified about all development activity taking place in their area and actually have no intention of creating a plan.

After the City has selected the neighborhood associations to work with, a neighborhood planner guides them through an inclusive planning process. In each city groups start with a visioning process and SWOT analysis. The resulting plan includes a vision statement, set of objectives and implementation strategies. Additionally, each program calls for land use, infrastructure, and implementation suggestions to be included in plans.

While each city shares these similarities there are some differences. El Paso's program is the youngest and is still being developed; currently, implementation is a problem there. San Antonio's neighborhood planning program is more detailed and structured than El Paso. It includes provisions to aid implementation including small grants and an indicator system. Fort Worth's program seems to be the most advanced. By making the planning process both structured and competitive, neighborhood groups have incentive to create more effective plans.