Love thy Neighbor(hood Association) Neighborhood Perspectives on City Support in Minneapolis following the Neighborhood Revitalization Program

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Abstract

The City of Minneapolis' approach to local planning and engagement efforts has shifted over the past four decades. In the 1990s and 2000s the Minneapolis Neighborhood Revitalization Program (MNRP) positioned neighborhood associations as the principal agents of change in their communities. Over time as city-level goals have changed, so has the City's approach to neighborhood association support and empowerment. Prior literature on the MNRP has focused primarily on assessing its outcomes, finding that the program disproportionately benefited middle-class, white homeowners. Previous research has relied on analyses of spending patterns and neighborhood level outcomes. I employ qualitative interviewing in order to look beyond an impact analysis, and answer the question how has the transition from the decentralized model of the MNRP to a more centralized model today impacted the operations and work of neighborhood associations in Minneapolis? I find that the models of neighborhood oversight that followed the MNRP, principally Minneapolis' Neighborhoods 2020 plan, have devalued the role of neighborhood associations in community level outreach and planning. Whereas previously during the MNRP neighborhood associations were responsible for local planning and outreach, today they are seen as one of many tools in the City's approach to local planning and equitable engagement. This shift has had tangible effects on the operations of neighborhood associations, with many feeling their ability to sustain themselves financially is in jeopardy, and therefore so is their ability to meet the expectations the City has for neighborhood associations.

Abbreviations Guide

TIF - Tax Increment Financing
MNRP - Minneapolis Neighborhood Revitalization Program
MNCR - Minneapolis Neighborhood & Community Relations
NCEC - Neighborhood Community Engagement Commission
CPP - Community Participation Program
CBD - Central Business District
EEF - Equitable Engagement Funds
NNF - Neighborhood Network Funds
NAP - Neighborhood Action Plan
CURA - Center for Urban and Regional Affairs
JPA - Joint Powers Agreement

Introduction

In the early 1990's the City of Minneapolis, in cooperation with the State of Minnesota, secured funding for a program meant to revitalize and empower neighborhoods throughout the city. The funded program, the Minneapolis Neighborhood Revitalization Program (MNRP), was unique in the level of autonomy and plan-making authority it granted neighborhood associations (NRP, 2008). Nearly 40 years on from the beginning of the program, the effects of the MNRP are still felt across the city and its neighborhoods. The MNRP made $20 million a year of funding for 20 years available to neighborhood associations through Tax Increment Financing (TIF). Today each neighborhood is guaranteed a minimum of $25,000 a year. The change in city level priorities and support has had repercussions for the perceived self-efficacy and stability of neighborhood associations in Minneapolis.

In this paper I seek to answer a question that has not been addressed by other authors who have focused on the MNRP: how has the transition from the funding and support model of the MNRP to the current approach of the City, the Minneapolis Neighborhood & Community Relations department (MNCR), and Neighborhoods 2020 affected neighborhood associations in Minneapolis? I describe how members of neighborhood associations feel their role in community planning and empowerment has changed from the MNRP to today, additionally I describe the perceived effects of this shift on the operation of neighborhood associations as well as their relationship with the City of Minneapolis. Finally, I describe how the role of neighborhood associations in local-decision making and planning has changed. Under the guidance of the MNCR and the Neighborhoods 2020 guiding framework the emphasis has moved from empowerment of neighborhood associations to achieve city level goals, to an emphasis of equitable engagement and participation among neighborhood association boards that historically failed to equitably represent their communities. Rather than being a primary vehicle for the city to carry out local planning, revitalization, and resident empowerment, today neighborhood associations are seen as one tool in the city's larger toolbox of means to promote equitable citizen participation.

Background

1. A Brief History of Neighborhood Associations

Before any extensive discussion of the rich history of neighborhood association management and support in Minneapolis, first must come an overview of neighborhood associations more broadly and how they fit into the mosaic of community organizations within the United States. Historically neighborhood associations have formed in reaction to hyperlocal issues, usually surrounding land-use and public service delivery (Guest and Oropesa, 1984; Janelle, 1977; Logan and Rabrenovic, 1990). The Garden City Movement of the early 20th century is usually associated with creating the social ethic which informs many neighborhood associations today, primarily cooperation among neighbors to preserve aesthetic, social, and economic values (McKenzie, 1994). Today there are many varieties of bodies that could be seen as neighborhood associations, such as Homeowners Associations, Tenant Unions, or Condominium Associations, all of which are encompassed by Logan and Rabrenovic's description of neighborhood associations as "a civic organization oriented toward maintaining or improving the quality of life in a geographically delimited residential area" is most apt for the purposes of this paper (Logan and Rabrenovic, 1990). However, for the purposes of this work, I will be focusing exclusively on the formal neighborhood association assigned to each of the 84 Minneapolis neighborhoods by the City of Minneapolis, while acknowledging that there may very well exist other community organizations within each geographic neighborhood which carry out similar activities to the neighborhood association. One final distinction worth noting is that whereas membership within Homeowner or Condominium Associations is often mandatory (McCabe, 2011) membership within neighborhood associations in Minneapolis is entirely voluntary.

2. The Origins of the MNRP (1989 - 2012)

Prior to the 1990s neighborhood associations in Minneapolis were characterized by ad hoc groups run almost exclusively by volunteers. Neighborhood boundaries were porous and informal across most of the city. Neighborhood

organizations recognized as advisory to the city government, such as Cedar-Riverside, received the majority of their funding from federal block grants (Nathanson, 2014). Many of these advisory neighborhood organizations formed in reaction to neighborhood level issues, as was the case for the city's first recognized neighborhood association, Prospect Park Association, as well as the neighborhood focused community organizations that sprung up in Cedar-Riverside during the redevelopment era of the 1970s and beyond (Hosmer, 2016; Stoecker, 1994). This reactionary nature of informal neighborhood associations was not unique to Minneapolis; across the United States, new neighborhood associations often form in response to development pressures (Moore & McGregor, 2021).

In the 1980s capital investment in Minneapolis was incredibly unequal, with the lion's share focused on the Central Business District to the dismay of outlying neighborhoods (NRP, 2008). As a result, many of Minneapolis' neighborhoods were under severe threat of decline and in need of investment. At the same time, the number of high-poverty census tracts in the city ballooned, from 11 to 32, encompassing 70,081 people (Orfield, 1997). This trend coincided with a decline in urban neighborhood redevelopment spending by nearly 40% compared to the early 1980s (Filner, 2006). These trends were only exacerbated by movement from the urban core to the suburbs, the City of Minneapolis lost 14% of its population to the suburbs in the 1970s and this number only continued to grow into the following decade –a phenomenon that was being observed across most US cities at the time (de Souza Briggs and Mueller, 1997).

All of these forces contributed to an overall sense of neglect within Minneapolis neighborhoods. City leaders convened a Task Force to assess the state of the city's neighborhoods and what level of investment would be needed to reverse contemporaneous trends. To adequately reverse the perceived decline occurring in the city's neighborhoods, the Task Force concluded that over $3 billion in investment would be needed. Based on the findings of the Task Force, an Implementation Committee was formed in 1989 to identify how to achieve the needed revitalization. The result of these efforts was Minneapolis' Neighborhood Revitalization Program.

2.1 Political Support for the MNRP

The MNRP was a joint effort by the City of Minneapolis and the State of Minnesota Legislature. Legislators and city leaders agreed that a monumental amount of effort would be required to revitalize declining urban neighborhoods, with a focus on reducing the exodus of middle-class white homeowners. The roughly $400 million in funds for the MNRP was generated through a tax increment financing (TIF) district encompassing downtown Minneapolis' Central Business District. Funds generated through the TIF would be used to fund the MNRP and subsequently neighborhood associations throughout the city.

In 1990, following the appropriate action from the State Legislature, the City of Minneapolis passed the legislation necessary to formally pave the way for the MNRP. The MNRP would be governed by a Joint Power Agreement between five government jurisdictions, the City of Minneapolis, Hennepin County, the Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board, the Minneapolis Public Schools, and the Minneapolis Public Library. This body, in conjunction with stakeholders from neighborhoods, private foundations, labor, the State, and community groups, would approve revitalization plans assembled by each neighborhood association, known as Neighborhood Action Plans (NAP) and then release MNRP funding in a two phased approach (Minneapolis Code of Ordinances, 1990).

2.2 MNRP Goals and Implementation Approach

The City of Minneapolis hoped to achieve four goals through the MNRP: (1) build neighborhood capacity, (2) redesign public services, (3) increase government agency collaboration, and (4) create a sense of community (NRP, 2008). These goals were designed to be achieved through each neighborhood's NAP. Before each neighborhood association could draft and submit their NAP for approval they were required to complete a Participation Agreement (PA). This document spelled out how each neighborhood association would ensure a broad range of people and ideas were included in their planning process, as well as define salient neighborhood issues and opportunities (Ibid.). Once each NAP was drafted it had to be approved by neighborhood residents, then sent to the MNRP city staff and policy board for final approval. After approval, previously set aside funds would be allocated. City staff were encouraged to provide

oversight and help as neighborhoods implemented their NAP, however there were no formal requirements for how the city worked with neighborhood associations on implementation.

Each neighborhood association was required to submit a NAP to access MNRP funds, but not all neighborhoods received the same amount of funding. During the NAP process, each of the 67 neighborhood associations self-selected into one of three types: protection, revitalization, or redirection. At this point it is important to note that not all 84 of the city's neighborhoods would have their own neighborhood association, as such during Phase I planning there were 67 neighborhood associations. This number has fluctuated since the beginning of the MNRP as many neighborhoods have pursued mergers or consolidations. However, in some cases neighborhoods have split up as was the case with the Phillips neighborhood. Protection was meant to describe neighborhoods that were relatively sound and faced little to no decline; this type included 25 neighborhood associations. The typical protection neighborhood could be described as one with a relatively affluent population of stable residents, typically further from the city core and less dense than inner city neighborhoods. Revitalization described neighborhoods that were better off than some but were still in need of improvement, this category represented 27 neighborhood associations. This category is best encapsulated by neighborhoods who were suffering from a loss of capital and population due to the flight of affluent homeowners but still had a decent portion of medium-high income residents and some necessary social and community services. The final classification type, redirection, was reserved for neighborhoods that faced the greatest risk of severe decline if no intervention or investment was carried out, 15 of the 67 neighborhood associations self-selected into this type. Redirection neighborhoods were those with a large population of low-income residents that suffered heavily from loss of affluent homeowners and reductions in available neighborhood services and amenities. Examples of such amenities include deteriorating or neglected housing stock, an atrophying commercial sector, or lack of access to basic necessities. Redirection neighborhoods were eligible for the most amount of funding, followed by revitalization, with protection being eligible for the least amount of funding. In addition to neighborhood type, the city used three variable clusters to determine allocation amounts for each neighborhood. These clusters used metrics on neighborhood size, poverty, and housing (Ibid.). In total, funding amounts ranged from $400,000 to $18 million (Holzer, 2017).

One early Phase I analysis of the NRP tracked the relationship between a variety of neighborhood factors, such as amount of investment through the NRP, as well as resident satisfaction with their neighborhood with the classification of each neighborhood (preservation, revitalization, or redirection). On average, neighborhoods classified as redirection received the most funding per capita through the NRP during Phase I - outspending protection neighborhoods three-fold as a result. Additionally, redirection neighborhoods took longer on average (3.6 years) to implement their plans, this is greater than the 2.8 and 2.5 years for preservation and revitalization neighborhoods respectively. In addition to their greater need, redirection neighborhoods also accounted for 90% of rental housing constructed or repaired during Phase I of the NRP (Berger, 2000). These trends identified by Berger highlight how rather than being a superficial designation, redirection neighborhoods were in fact in greater need at the beginning of the NRP than revitalization or preservation neighborhoods.

While need may have been greatest amongst redirection neighborhoods, revitalization was required across the city and since one of the main motivations behind the NRP was to prevent further loss of middle-class white homeowners in Minneapolis neighborhoods, 52.5% of NRP funds were to be used on housing programs (NRP, 2008). Each neighborhood association board decided which kinds of housing would be prioritized, which resulted in roughly 90% of housing funds being set aside for home improvement or homebuyer assistance (Filner, 2006). Viewed through this lens of improving neighborhoods for homeowners, the MNRP was successful. Compared to St. Paul, Minneapolis neighborhoods performed better across metrics such as income, rent, and vacancy rate following the implementation of the MNRP and outcomes of the plan-making process at the neighborhood level were disproportionately geared towards the needs of middle-class white homeowners (Holzer, 2017; Goetz and Sidney, 1994).

3. City Departments post MNRP (2012 - 2024)

The Joint Powers Agreement officially ended on January 20th 2012 (Minneapolis Code of Ordinances, 1990) at which point the City of Minneapolis formed a new department to manage the MNRP, the MNCR. The MNRP as a program existed from 1991 to 2012 and encompassed two funding phases (Phase I and Phase II), but even today many neighborhood associations continue to spend down Phase II MNRP money. Thus, the MNRP did not fully end in 2012, but rather the MNRP framework model for how the city interacts with neighborhood associations shifted.

3.1 The Transition Years

The MNCR was formed in 2010 and tasked with overtaking administration of the MNRP as neighborhood associations navigated the use of remaining funds. Since the MNRP funding model ended with Phase II funds, MNCR also worked to conceptualize future funding programs for neighborhood associations. Although sources cite different years, around 2010, the Neighborhood and Community Engagement Commission (NCEC) worked with MNCR to formulate a way for the city to improve community participation in neighborhood associations and the greater community. The MNCR's first program was the Community Participation Program (CPP). Beginning in 2014, CPP funded neighborhood associations in two three-year segments between 2014 and 2019 (City of Minneapolis, 2018). The CPP provided at least $3 million each year for increasing participation in neighborhood associations across the 84 recognized Minneapolis neighborhoods. The funding for CPP was from the same TIF district used for the MNRP, which expired in 2019 (City of Minneapolis, 2020). Starting around 2017, the MNCR began to collect public feedback on a future funding plan that would eventually become known as Neighborhoods 2020.

3.2 Funding under the MNCR: NNF and EEF

During the second three-year cycle of the CPP the Minneapolis City Council commissioned the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs at the University of Minnesota (CURA) to conduct a racial equity analysis of the City's past efforts to empower neighborhood associations (Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, 2019). This analysis focused on the MNRP's racial equity gaps that were identified in prior research (Sidney and Goetz, 1994; Fagotto and Fung, 2006; and Filner, 2006). The main finding offered by this report was that white homeowners were the primary benefactors of the MNRP model. The CURA report released in 2019, combined with the previously mentioned outreach efforts taken by the MNCR, culminated in the development of the Neighborhoods 2020 Program. Neighborhoods 2020 sought to increase the participation of marginalized groups within neighborhood associations, while providing additional and consistent yearly funding which would now come from the City's general fund. The two new principal funds available to neighborhood associations were the Neighborhood Network Fund (NNF) and the Equitable Engagement Fund (EEF). Starting in 2021, each neighborhood association would receive $20,000 in NNF, then this amount would drop to $10,000 annually for subsequent years. In addition to the base funding from NNF, each neighborhood would receive EEF based on a formula that takes into consideration demographics and risk of displacement data within each neighborhood (City of Minneapolis, 2020). EEF allocation closely resembles the formula presented by CURA in their report. As of 2024, the maximum EEF amount received by a neighborhood was $138,266 while the lowest was $1,198 (Ibid.). EEF can be used for costs ranging from administration and staff time to website and social media maintenance (City of Minneapolis, 2025). In order to access these funds, neighborhood associations are required to submit engagement plans and reports on how funds will be used to support the goals of MNCR and Neighborhoods 2020.

4. Critiques of the MNRP

Since its inception in 1991 the MNRP was controversial, no similar project had ever been attempted in Minnesota and very likely in the US more generally (Scavo, 1993). The novelty of the MNRP's structure opened it up to scrutiny from academics, citizens, and members of the government alike. Given the large amount of money allocated to the program, stakeholders and academics had a strong desire to determine whether the MNRP achieved its goals.

One of the earliest evaluations of the MNRP is perhaps also the most influential, despite being completed before the majority of neighborhoods had finished the Phase I planning process. Goetz and Sidney (1994) sought to assess the success of the program by analyzing three neighborhood associations that had completed their Phase I NAPs. The authors compared the organizations before and after the start of the MNRP using three organizational metrics. The author's main findings can be separated into two categories, findings related to representation and findings related to participation. During the planning process citizen participation reached higher levels than before the MNRP, mainly attributed to the amount of funding involved and the draw created by large amounts of available funding. However, this participation was usually not representative of the neighborhoods being served. Participation and representation in the neighborhood association were strongly biased towards middle class property owners.

Much of the literature embraced Goetz and Sidney's (1994) findings and built upon them in their analysis of the MNRP, however, others have focused more on the design of the program itself. Fagotto and Fung (2006) analyzed the institutional design of the MNRP to provide a bit more nuance to the discussion of participation within neighborhood associations during the MNRP. Fagotto and Fung agree with Goetz and Sidney (1994) so far as participation was biased towards specific demographics, but they argue that participation in neighborhood associations includes a wider range of positions than Goetz and Sidney (1994) considered. While many board positions were dominated by specific demographics, Fagotto and Fung (2006) argue that this does not mean other positions available within neighborhood associations are not accessible to residents from different backgrounds. Furthermore, Fagotto and Fung (2006) introduce the idea that the disproportionate participation from middle class homeowners was what the MNRP was built to facilitate. They argue, with evidence from city documents from the time, that the MNRP was built to retain the fleeing middle class, and as such allocating resources to home rehabilitation and renovations is an understandable result. There is also no solid evidence to support that, although homeowners dominated aspects of participation and decision-making, that they disproportionately benefited from MNRP dollars in a way that deviated from the expectations for the use of MNRP funds. But, just like Goetz and Sidney (1994), Fagotto and Fung (2006) acknowledge that the MNRP lacked diverse participation from the communities it sought to empower. Yet rather than being an accidental outcome, Fagotto and Fung (2006) argue it was inevitable based on the motivation for and design of the MNRP. Both of the aforementioned studies were conducted early on in the MNRP process, but there have also been more recent attempts to evaluate the effects of the MNRP on neighborhood associations.

Whereas efforts such as those undertaken by Goetz and Sidney, and Fagotto and Fung, focused primarily on assessing more qualitative factors, but Holzer (2017) takes a quantitative approach using census data to compare Minneapolis neighborhoods involved in the MNRP with St. Paul neighborhoods who did not benefit from such a program. Holzer (2017) is more concerned with overall neighborhood quality, not aspects of the neighborhood associations themselves. By employing a range of metrics, including income, rent, vacancy rate, and more, Holzer (2017) contends that, compared to their statistically matched counterparts in St. Paul, Minneapolis neighborhoods performed better following the implementation of the MNRP. In fact, every neighborhood that received funding showed improvement on at least one of the indicators studied. These findings seem to suggest that the MNRP improved neighborhood quality in most of the participating neighborhoods.

In a similar vein to Fagotto and Fung (2006), Filner (2006) studies the effectiveness of the MNRP within the context of participatory forms of governance. This sort of analysis seeks to position the MNRP not as a one-off program meant to fix a point-in-time problem, but rather as a potential model for how decentralized local governance could be supported more generally. This is an important distinction to make, since how the MNRP is viewed will influence discussions of its "success" or "failure". By positioning the MNRP as a potential example of a more participatory approach to local empowerment, Filner (2006) creates an opportunity for applying the MNRP to contexts bereft of the original Minneapolis-specific motivators for the instigation of the MNRP. Filner (2006) attempts to diagnose the cause of disproportionate representation and participation by certain demographics in the MNRP planning process. Due to the strong desire of the city to retain middle-class homeowners, the structure of the MNRP facilitated the bolstering of the already powerful in the community, rather than the empowerment of the marginalized. The

requirements placed on neighborhood associations by the city were conducive to the overaccumulation of power by community members who had latent technical knowledge pertinent to the running of neighborhood associations.

Filner (2006) was also interested in how the structure of the MNRP could be relevant to cases beyond Minneapolis. The MNRP's lack of meaningful participation from the entire community bodes poorly for its prospects as a case study for decentralization of planning authority. Adequate participation is a necessary requirement for any model of governance that hopes to be seen as legitimate by its constituents (Berry, Thomson and Portney, 1993). But the gaps in participation are also associated with how the MNRP was structured to bias participation (Filner and Fagotto, 2006; Fung, 2006).

However, while others have sought to quantify the success of the MNRP based on its initial four goals, none have sought to comprehensively assess how the legacy of the MNRP has influenced the perspective of neighborhood associations with regards to city-neighborhood relationships in the wake of the dramatic change in funding and resources available to neighborhood associations during the MNRP compared to the current dynamic under the MNCR.

Methods

1. Interviews

I used qualitative interviews to better understand the perspectives and experiences of those currently or formerly involved with neighborhood associations across Minneapolis. Qualitative interviews were used to tease out specific historical and contemporary trends that can trace their source back to the structure of the MNRP and/or current departments and programs in the City of Minneapolis, such as the MNCR and Neighborhoods2020.

Outreach and Sample

Minneapolis currently has 67 official neighborhood associations (City of Minneapolis, 2025). I retrieved the official contact information for each neighborhood association from the City of Minneapolis' website and used these email contacts to request an interview with each neighborhood association. I contacted all 67 neighborhood associations, and of these, 22 responded to the request for an interview. Of these 22, 10 neighborhood associations scheduled an interview, resulting in 17 total interviewees. The pool of interviewees consisted of 13 former or current board members and 4 current or former staff members. Interviewees used a Google Calendar scheduling tool to sign up for a 1-hour interview slot; they were given the option of selecting an in-person or virtual interview. In the case that the interviewee opted for a virtual meeting, a Zoom Video Call was scheduled. Once a time was agreed upon for the interview each participant was sent a reminder follow-up email reiterating the agreed upon meeting location and time. Interview questions were made available to interviewees in advance upon request. Interview questions and prompts can be found in Appendix 1.1.

Data Collection

Interview participants were informed that none of their personal information would be disseminated. I maintain confidentiality of all interviewees and neighborhood associations in my findings. Interviewees were given the opportunity to decline any prompts or questions they did not wish to answer. Interviewees were also asked to verbally consent to the recording of the interviews for the purposes of transcription and coding. A summary of proposed research methods and protocol were shared with the University of Minnesota Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB determined that the proposed activity did not meet the regulatory definition of human subjects research as defined by DHHS and FDA regulations, as such the project did not require IRB review or approval (IRB ID: STUDY00024476). Despite this finding, verbal consent was requested from each participating interviewee.

2. Coding of Qualitative Interviews

Recorded interviews were digitally transcribed using *Otter.ai version 3.7.0*. *Otter.ai* is a free to use voice to text transcription software which is able to transcribe digital audio and video files. Files that were uploaded to and transcribed by *Otter.ai* were scrubbed of any personally identifying information. Each transcript was then uploaded to *Atlas.ti version 25.0.0* for analysis. *Atlas.ti* was used for primary cycle coding of transcripts, wherein codes were applied inductively based on themes that emerged through reviewing the transcripts (Bingham, 2023). A detailed table of codes can be found in Appendix 1.2. In the initial round of coding, 72 unique codes were created to describe the themes identified in the interview transcripts. Following this primary cycle of coding, each of the 72 codes were aggregated via a second coding cycle into four larger code topic groups: "City and Neighborhood Association Relationships", "Dimensions of Neighborhood Associations", "Governance Ideologies", and "Interplay of Neighborhood Associations and the Community". From these larger code groups, I summarize my findings into two larger themes: (1) interactions between the city and neighborhood associations and (2) dimensions of neighborhood associations. This approach adopts components of Bingham (2023) five-phase process of qualitative data analysis, except rather than having the secondary cycle of coding being the more specific round, the primary cycle started with specific codes that were then lumped into broader topic groups in the secondary cycle of coding.

Findings

My analysis identified two distinct themes that have been influenced by the changing dynamics between neighborhood associations and neighborhood oversight departments at the city-level between the years of the MNRP and today: (1) Interactions between the City and Neighborhood Associations (2) and Dimensions of Neighborhood Associations. Together these themes represent how the standards set by the management, funding, and organization of the MNRP have continued to influence the expectations of both neighborhood associations with regards to what types and quantities of resources and support are required for stability and survival. These findings suggest that neighborhood associations feel they have been devalued by the city compared to during the MNRP, and that rather than being the primary vehicle for local planning and outreach, as they were during the MNRP, today neighborhood associations are just one constituent of many in the city and MNCRs more centralized approach to equitable engagement and community planning. (Figure 1)

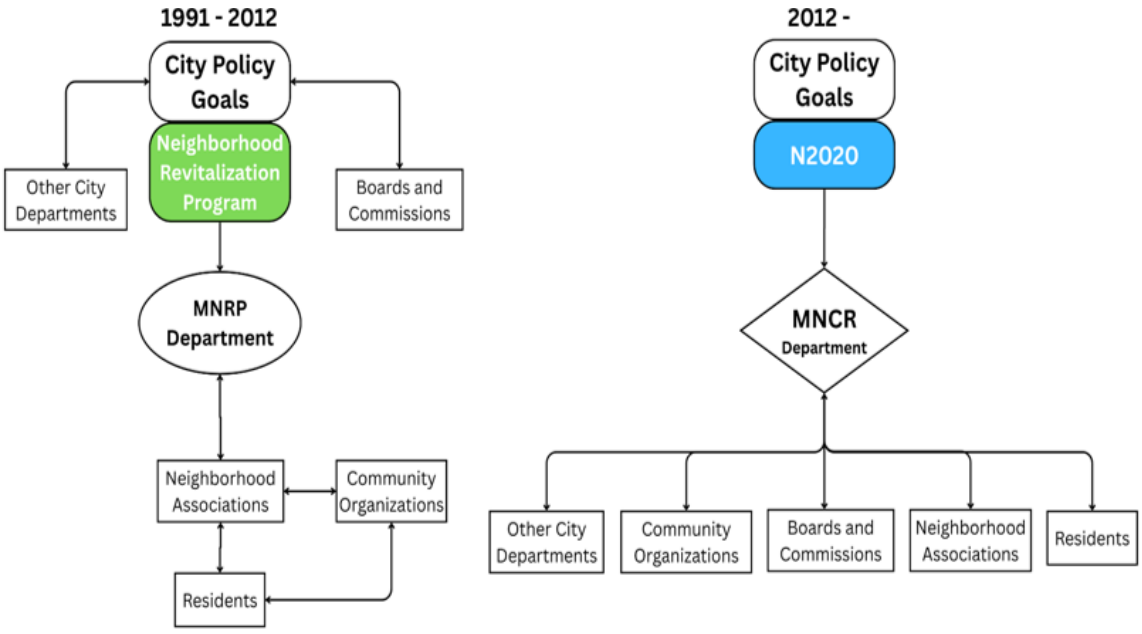

Figure 1: Comparison of more decentralized structure of management present during the Neighborhood Revitalization Program framework (1991 - 2012) versus the more centralized approach of the Neighborhoods2020 framework under MNCR.

1. Interactions between the City and Neighborhood Associations

Interactions between the City of Minneapolis and neighborhood associations emerged as a key site of divergence between the MNRP and today. For interviewees, the city at times referred to a range of actors, including city council members or staff associated with city departments. I describe three key differences that emerged through interviews about how the dynamic between the City and neighborhood associations in Minneapolis has changed since the MNRP.

1.1 City Champions

Interviewees reported that having an involved and present member of city government available to the association increased their ability to channel the voices of their communities upwards to City Hall. When discussing how they were able to get started on MNRP work as soon as possible, one interviewee pointed to the fact that buy-in and support for neighborhoods at the city level had a lot to do with the ability to get work done:

"*And so the city stepped up and they gave us early access and, I, it probably had a lot to do with who the city council members were at that time.*"

Having a champion in city hall made it easier for the organization to understand the breadth of options available under the MNRP, and access funds early. Following the MNRP the feeling of support from City Hall has waned among neighborhood association members. Interviewees reported that the presence of Ward representatives at association meetings has diminished and there is a perception that city council members are not champions for neighborhoods in the same way they were during the MNRP. As one interviewee put it:

"I don't necessarily see that the city is an advocate for neighborhoods, and that's just my gut reaction, that I don't feel like it's an advocate for neighborhoods, in a way that NRP was an advocate for neighborhoods."

Here the interviewee is referring to the MNCR when they describe the city. Interviewees shared a sentiment that the emphasis by the MNCR on equitable engagement to increase the diversity of representation within neighborhood association boards has led the department to be more concerned with larger ethnic or cultural groups than geographically defined neighborhoods. Reviewing the MNCRs Blueprint for Equitable Engagement shows that rather than viewing neighborhood associations as a way to access these larger communities, the associations are viewed as a community in and of themselves, included alongside other communities such as Senior, Renter, or African American (City of Minneapolis, 2016). Increasing equitable engagement by neighborhood associations and increasing outreach with larger cultural or ethnic groups are not necessarily at odds, however interviewees expressed a belief that this shift in emphasis has come with an accompanying disinterest in the neighborhoods themselves.

1.2 Expectations from the City

During the MNRP it was far more common for neighborhood associations to have one or more full time staff members, usually in the form of coordinators or executive directors. Today, a minimum EEF amount of $15,000, combined with $10,000 of NNF means many associations cannot always afford a full-time staffer. Without dedicated staff it is incredibly difficult to create programs and projects that meet the expectations of the City:

"The city has a lot of expectations of neighborhoods. Frankly, they want them to, you know, to provide engagement, to provide information to the city and at the same time, they make a lot of expectations of neighborhood associations… without realistic thinking that, how do you do that without having a staff?"

Even with a more refined scope today, interviewees are used to the level of productivity present "in the old days" under the scale of work expected during the MNRP. As advocates for their communities, interviewees want their associations to be working with their fingers in as many pots as possible. As such, they have not scaled their scope of

work down as funding from the city has changed, rather neighborhood associations have carried the standard set by the MNRP into the present day.

1.3 Support from the City

Perceptions of whether the support provided to neighborhood associations by the city – financial, administrative, or technical – is adequate depended strongly on the beliefs of interviewees about the role neighborhood associations *ought* to play in the management structures of cities and communities. Those who believed strongly in the intrinsic value of neighborhood associations as a source of empowerment and activism for the community were more likely to believe that they were entitled to financial support from the city regardless of city priorities or expectations. This same camp was more likely to state that current levels of funding through NNF and EEF were inadequate and do not usually go beyond supporting bare necessities:

"You're stuck with the $15,000 and that's it for rent, utilities and salary and benefits for your people."

However, there were interviewees who believed that the role neighborhood associations play could be achieved otherwise by the city. This perspective was less likely to take issue with the levels of funding provided by the city through MNCR, instead positing that neighborhood associations struggling under the current model had unrealistic expectations because of the standard set by the MNRP. However, it is not just financial support that is seen as lacking by some, but administrative and technical support as well. Those interviewed felt that the wealth of administrative support provided by MNRP staff and the city to comply with independent requirements around accounting and other technical services was greater and more proactive in the past. As one interviewee explains:

"Their approach in Neighborhoods 2020, is more of a funder, of a, you know, a foundation type funder…. So in the [M]NRP days before there, you know, there wasn't that. There was the more approachable help. I guess there were people that there were grant writers available from the city that would work [with] you."

These differing perspectives around what level of support is considered appropriate accentuate the role the MNRP played as an expectation-setter for many neighborhood associations. When speaking about shortfalls in current administrative, technical, or financial support, interviewees almost always used the MNRP as a reference point.

2. Dimensions of Neighborhood Associations

2.1 Financial Stability

The degree of fiscal stability enjoyed by neighborhood associations in Minneapolis today depends heavily on decisions made during the MNRP. Multiple interviewees emphasized the importance of being savvy with initial allocations of MNRP money. Given the uncertainty of the future and city directives on use of funds for housing, many associations prioritized single family loan programs with their MNRP funds. These loans were paid back with interest and thus served as a buffer for changes in support and funding from the city in the years following the dissolution of the JPA in 2012. Among neighborhood associations that were unable to leverage MNRP funds in a way that secured long-term financial stability, survival is top of mind today. Interviewees spoke extensively about their concern for the long-term survival of their respective association given current support from the city.

The reduction in financial and administrative support from the city and MNCR towards neighborhood associations has had tangible effects on the stability of their organizations. The current level of funding makes securing full or even part time staff members difficult, thus impacting the ability of neighborhood associations to accumulate and maintain institutional knowledge.

2.2 Volunteer Capacity

The passion and dedication of volunteers was held up by interviewees as the bedrock of neighborhood associations. The perspectives and knowledge from professional, academic, or personal experience that volunteers bring to a neighborhood association are crucial in helping navigate the more difficult aspects of running the organization. Many interviewees alluded to the importance that such latent technical knowledge had in allowing them to succeed during the MNRP and up to the modern day:

"there were people of influence who lived here who could play the game, perhaps better"

While staff and volunteer capacity were both listed as key ingredients for a stable neighborhood association, the former has suffered from funding decreases while the latter has been influenced by cultural changes beyond the control of the city. Shifts in cultures of volunteerism, and the social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic mean that while volunteers have always been a necessary part of neighborhood associations, recruitment, especially of younger community members, has suffered.

2.3 Awareness, and Engagement

Interviewees spoke morosely about the current state of outreach and the difficulties their organizations face recruiting equitably given the status quo of support. One key aspect of outreach that is impacted by staffing and funding shortages is the ability to conduct extensive face-to-face engagement. Budget and staffing constraints have meant that outreach has moved to increasingly virtual rather than in-person channels, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic. When prompted as to whether they believed the majority of residents in the neighborhood knew about the neighborhood association, one interviewee responded with a "blanket no".

When speaking of awareness during the MNRP, interviewees insisted that having large amounts of money and discretion over how it was allocated served to facilitate engagement from the community. Interviewees described how the scope of projects that neighborhood associations are able to tackle today is substantially smaller than during the MNRP, thus attracting less attention and participation from residents. The visible signs of success, in the form of large scale housing, infrastructure, or parks projects, which were effective in bringing neighbors to the organization are relics of a long-gone past.

"Development was one of the drivers. Housing and commercial development was one of the drivers of people being interested in the neighborhood organization that's basically dried up since 2021. There's just nothing happening."
"There were visible signs of success. And we haven't had a lot of those visible signs of success anymore. It's a lot of frustrated people at different levels for different reasons."

Awareness is the first step in activating interest from the residents of the neighborhood, but awareness alone does not produce a steady stream of equitable engagement from the community. The voluntary nature of involvement was pointed to by interviewees as a key reason for why equitable involvement is difficult. Those that have the time and resources to be actively involved are more likely to be white, affluent, and older as highlighted by analyses of the MNRP. This demographic trend does not achieve the equitable engagement goals laid out by MNCR, as such increasing engagement in a more equitable manner requires push factors in the form of engagement and outreach, but also pull factors in the form of projects and causes worth participating in. Interviewees felt strongly that you cannot expect community members to show up solely for the sake of showing up, they must believe there is something worth showing up for.

The issues and concerns of the community are often granular enough that they would not be recognized by the city without a channel or forum such as that offered by neighborhood associations, as one interviewee described when discussing park improvements undertaken during the MNRP:

"[it was] something people in the neighborhood cared about that wasn't horrendous enough to achieve notoriety in the city as a whole. But when we focused on it, this is the value of [M]NRP. It made the focus more at the kind of molecular level, like in the community then, and it balanced the power in a normal sense of it, not like some vicious power thing, but we now had power, because we had access to funds "

Ultimately, in order for neighborhood associations to achieve the policy goals expected of them by the City they must also be supported with the appropriate level of financial and technical resources. The perception of interviewees was that these resources were in more ample supply during the MNRP, and as a result, desirable or not in retrospect, the goal of investing in housing stock and greater retention of an affluent middle class in city neighborhoods was achieved. Interviewees believed that if financial and administrative resources were increased, then the desired policy outcomes of the city, in this case greater awareness and more equitable engagement, would be more achievable. Increases in financial and administrative resources at par with what was seen during the NRP would increase the stability of neighborhood associations, in turn increasing capacity and ability to meet policy objectives (Figure 2.). Successful achievement or non-achievement of these objectives further influences the perception by neighborhood associations of the efficacy of the city as a governing body.

Figure 2: Conceptual model for how provision of ample financial and technical resources increases the ability of neighborhood organizations to achieve governmental policy goals.

Discussion and Recommendations

In this paper, I sought to explore how the MNRP has influenced the perceptions of current neighborhood association support from the City of Minneapolis through Neighborhoods 2020 and the MNCR. My findings from qualitative interviews with staff and current or former board members at 10 neighborhood associations across the city suggest that neighborhood associations generally feel they have been devalued by the city after the MNRP. This sense of devaluation has come in the form of decreased administrative and technical support, decreases in financial support, and a shift from being the focus of community planning and engagement during the MNRP to one route of many under the MNCR. I offer three recommendations based on my findings for the City of Minneapolis and neighborhood associations working throughout the city.

During the MNRP, the scale of work being done by neighborhood associations often required cooperation with larger governmental entities, such as the parks or public works departments. In contrast, the expectations of today's MNCR include neighborhood organizations as another community to be engaged by the city rather than a partner acting as a larger umbrella group to engage the more diverse ethnic and cultural groups within neighborhoods. Today, neighborhood associations are considered one component of MNCR's equitable engagement blueprint, rather than a primary vehicle for equitable engagement.

This work builds on previous work that was focused on determining the success of the MNRP through analyses of the inclusiveness of its planning processes and general effects on neighborhood quality (Goetz and Sidney, 1994 ; Filner, 2006; Fagotto and Fung, 2006; Holzer, 2017). Past work has been primarily concerned with whether the MNRP achieved its initial four goals of building neighborhood capacity, redesigning public services, increasing government agency collaboration, and creating a sense of community during the course of the 20 year program. My findings show that even as priorities at the city and state level change, neighborhood associations continue to perceive their role in planning and governance based on the standard set by the MNRP.

My findings suggest that neighborhood associations require consistent involvement from elected officials and city staff in order to feel they are valued. Having an established pipeline from neighborhood to city government is essential for resident satisfaction (Hur and Bollinger, 2015). In addition to their role as upward funnels for community

voices, neighborhood associations that serve as local decision-makers are better able to tailor services and spending to local preferences (Tiebout, 1956). Maintaining organizational values that are conducive to filling their roles in the community requires adequate funding (Duncan, 2020; Colemon, 2019). My findings further support the importance of financial stability and autonomy of nonprofits such as neighborhood associations to ensure such organizations are able to achieve their goals (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). Substantial resources are required for nonprofits to diversify revenue when dependent on a single entity, such as the case for neighborhood associations in Minneapolis (Froelich, 1999; Carroll and Stater, 2009). My work shows that sourcing funds is increasingly difficult without robust staff and volunteer capacity.

This body of work highlights the reliance of under-resourced organizations on the voluntary time, and skill of board members to achieve equitable engagement and accurate representation (Andrews et al., 2010; Herman & Renz, 1997). The nature of voluntary boards during the MNRP and elsewhere, suggest that these members are more likely to be white, older, and homeowners (Goetz and Sidney, 1994; Moore and McGregor, 2021). Furthermore, my findings suggest that neighborhood associations are more reliant on volunteers today than in the past. My findings support the notion that shifts in cultures of volunteerism, and the social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic mean that while volunteers have always been a necessary component of nonprofits, recruitment, especially of younger community members, has suffered (Nesbit, Paarlberg, and Jo, 2024).

My findings show that the financial resources a neighborhood association has access to strongly influences the awareness of and participation in the organization by the community. This builds on early analyses of the MNRP that highlighted the role the injection of funds from the state and city had on the competitiveness of and participation in board elections (Goetz and Sidney, 1994). Furthermore, this work supports the idea that ideal neighborhood-based public involvement programs require that neighborhood associations have discretion over significant levels of funding in order to communicate to and recruit residents (Berry, Portney, and Thomson, 1993). Sentiments expressed by interviewees about the role neighborhood associations can play in outreach and engagement when sufficiently resourced, build on previous work that identifies such local community organizations as conducive to a host of factors that facilitate health, engagement, civic involvement, and bridging social capital (Ahlbrandt, 1984; Pilisuk & Parks, 1986; Taylor, Repetti, and Seeman, 1997; Berkowitz, 2000; Hur and Bollinger, 2015, Anderson and Christens, 2024; Li, Wen and Cooper, 2019; Ruef and Kwon, 2016).

If this work could be distilled into concrete recommendations for the City of Minneapolis, they would go as follows. Current approaches by the City of Minneapolis assume that residents will engage with neighborhood associations for the sake of participating, whereas those interviewed stressed the need for greater financial resources to equitably recruit residents to the board and broader participation in the neighborhood association. When residents are disinterested in the neighborhood association, the ability of the organization to resolve neighborhood issues and create meaningful connections with the city and community suffer (Li, Wen, and Cooper, 2019). Rather than addressing this shortcoming, the current approach by MNCR and the City of Minneapolis of reducing available resources only serves to disproportionately benefit neighborhoods that are already rife with latent technical knowledge.

In order to ensure that neighborhood associations are able to resist past trends around the biased demographics of their board makeups, the City of Minneapolis must equip them with greater financial, and administrative resources to ensure they are able to carry out campaigns aimed at equitable engagement. This would require increasing the base level of resources available to all neighborhood associations to incentivize involvement from groups who may traditionally not become involved. Instead of viewing the failures of the MNRP as a reason to restructure the way neighborhood associations are empowered and supported, the City and MNCR should co-opt the elements of the program that worked, principally decentralization of planning and decision-making, to the goal of equitable participation, rather than retention of affluent homeowners as was the purpose of the MNRP.

For neighborhood associations, my research suggests that greater inter-association cooperation and coordination may help ease the institutional hardships produced by limited financial and human capital resources. This

is not to be confused with a blanket endorsement of mergers, since many interviewees indicated that such an option is not desirable. Rather, neighborhood associations should seek out ways of increasing communication and collaboration with other neighborhood associations, in order to share information and resources in a way that compensates for perceived shortages of both the former and the latter from the City and MNCR. Increased collaboration may also help to increase long-term stability of individual associations by allowing for the centralization of mundane tasks that overwhelm less resourced associations when acting individually.

Conclusion

The MNRP offered a unique opportunity for supporting planning and decision-making at the neighborhood level. The program empowered neighborhood associations to be planners, representatives, and advocates for their community. While the results of the program were mixed, it set a standard for how neighborhood associations viewed themselves in the greater picture of city politics. As Minneapolis has transitioned to a more centralized approach to community outreach and engagement, as well as planning, neighborhood associations have been devalued as representative loci of their communities. This transition has been accompanied by a decrease in financial support to neighborhood associations, as well as a perceived decrease in administrative, technical, and political support from City Hall. Far from being superficial, these changes have influenced the ability of neighborhood associations to fulfill the role expected of them by MNCR. Less administrative support means the volunteer boards of neighborhood associations are expected to shoulder more responsibilities, all the while with less staff capacity. These factors influence the perception of neighborhood associations as to the feasibility of their long term stability and survival as organizations, and thus their ability to fulfill their essential roles in the community.

While I worked to incorporate a wide range of perspectives from neighborhood associations across the city, there are notable shortcomings to the approach of this paper. Principally, I did not speak to anyone from the City of Minneapolis, and I relied only on interviews with a small cross-section of neighborhood associations. Being able to incorporate the views and perspectives of those involved with the City during the MNRP as well as today would greatly improve this work. Additionally, there is a potential for bias, in that those that are most opinionated about the MNRP and MNCR would be most likely to respond to inquiry for interview. Finally, not every interviewee had a long enough tenure to have experienced the MNRP as well as interactions with the City and MNCR today, thus their opinions and perspectives will be biased towards the period they had the most direct involvement with their neighborhood association.

Future research can build on my findings by identifying the best approach to centering neighborhood associations in community engagement efforts that are equitable and representative. Additionally I have identified multiple qualities of neighborhood associations and their role within their communities, the literature would benefit from further explorations into what benefits related to civic participation, wellbeing, and community planning are associated with neighborhood associations, and most importantly, how communities benefit from having active and empowered neighborhood associations. Through this paper I have sought to represent the voices of neighborhood associations when previous work has focused primarily on analyses of data and outcomes, understanding more about the motivations and perspectives of those who are actively involved in their communities through neighborhood associations is necessary in order to better craft future initiatives aimed at empowering communities to participate in local governance, planning, and engagement.

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Appendix 1.1: Interview Script

Thank you for taking the time to sit down with me today. As you probably know I am interested in understanding the perspectives of those involved with neighborhood associations across Minneapolis with regards to the consequences and lasting impacts of the NRP and subsequent City programs on the organizational capacity of their respective Neighborhood Associations.

I am especially interested in the consequences the NRP had on the perceived strength and long term success or failure of neighborhood associations, or more specifically, whether the City was able to achieve one of their original goals with the NRP, that being the strengthening of organizational capacity.

While I will attempt to maintain a semblance of structure with some broad questions, I am mainly interested in hearing what you have to say as it relates to the prompts I will introduce. Do not hesitate to stray from the prompts if your mind carries you in a direction you want to explore with me. It is my hope that this meeting takes on more of a conversational rather than inquisitorial form.

- You can elect to not answer any prompts if you so desire
- None of your personal information will be shared or disseminated, however I may identify your position or role at your respective neighborhood association i.e. "A former/current board/community member identified x,y, and z as their organizations main concerns"
- Due to the conversational nature of this meeting, and my strong desire to be present in the moment as you speak, is it okay if I record this conversation so that I can ensure I am able to transcribe the necessary parts accurately?

Section 1 - Introduction

1. Can you begin by telling me about your role at [Insert Neighborhood Association]?
2. When did you become involved with the neighborhood association?

Section 2

1. Could you speak, to the extent of your knowledge or experience, about some of the lasting effects the NRP had on the Neighborhood Association?
2. Could you speak, to the extent of your knowledge or experience, about the effect Neighborhoods 2020 had on the Neighborhood Association?
3. One of the goals of the NRP was to increase the "capacity" of individual Neighborhood Associations, from your knowledge do you feel that this has been true for your Neighborhood Association?
4. Can you talk to me a bit about the resources/capacity the neighborhood had prior to the NRP? e.g. Staff, Newspaper, Office space, etc… and how have they changed over time?
5. What aspects of the NRPs structure do you believe were helpful for the Neighborhood Association when it came to achieving their goals? Which features were not helpful?
6. What aspects of Neighborhoods 2020s structure do you believe were helpful for the Neighborhood Association when it came to achieving their goals? Which features were not helpful?
7. In the time since the end of the NRP the City has seen numerous mergers between neighborhood associations, as well as efforts between certain Neighborhood Associations to combine resources, what do you feel has motivated these consolidations?
8. How would you describe the level of participation from the community in the Neighborhood Association today? What would be needed for Neighborhood Associations to increase citizen participation?

Section 3

9. How would you describe the Neighborhood Associations relationship with the City?
10. What role do you feel the city plays in supporting neighborhoods?
11. If a program similar to the NRP (that being a program wherein the city decentralized aspects of decision making to the neighborhood level) were to be implemented today, how would you like to see it designed? What features do you think would need to be included or excluded?
12. How much does your neighborhood rely on the City for funding? Does the neighborhood have any independent means of consistently raising or generating funds?
13. In your eyes, what are some of the main struggles facing your Neighborhood Association today?
14. In your eyes, what could the City do to increase the organizational capacity of the Neighborhood Association?
15. Do you believe the way the Neighborhood Associations are supported by the City today is sustainable?