



SEVEN KEYS TO NEIGHBORHOOD ACTION
by Joe Parko, Director
Urban Community Service
Georgia State University
and Past Vice-President,
National Association of
Neighborhoods

The most important thing people should know about volunteer neighborhood action is that it can work. It has worked. It is working NOW in thousands of neighborhoods across the nation.

The next most important thing to know is that enthusiasm isn't enough. If neighborhood action is to be successful it requires careful planning, effective organization, and stamina. Lots and lots of stamina. Like jogging, it is no sport for the short-winded. And purity of motive is no substitute for well-conceived, well-executed, sustained action. Remember, action is the fuel that powers a neighborhood organization. Without action, you and your neighbors might as well stay home and watch TV.

Unfortunately, there has often been more enthusiasm than realism about citizen volunteer action, and critics are justified in asking hard questions about neighborhood groups. How do they expect to bring about changes? Can they substitute action for reaction? How will they cope with the powerful vested interests they will confront? Where will they get the clout that will be needed to make real changes?

We are still far from having all the answers. But experience has taught us a few. Here are seven keys to effective neighborhood action.



SUSTAINED ACTION

The first key is that an effective volunteer neighborhood organization must be a full-time, continued "presence" on the scene. One of the deepest failings of volunteer action is the "here-today-gone-tomorrow" syndrome, the unpredictable waxing and waning of enthusiasm. Neighborhoods that organize only when there is a crisis are doomed to eventual failure. In matters of significant social action, the forces opposing change are powerful and deeply rooted. They have little respect for adversaries who lack staying power.



FOCUSED ACTION

An equally important key to successful neighborhood action is to select a limited number of clearly defined targets and hit them hard. Among the most familiar weaknesses of neighborhood action is the diffusion of volunteer energy and resources over too many targets, the brave but trivial effort, and the failure to tackle concrete, tangible, achievable goals.

To be effective, a neighborhood organization should focus its action on issues that meet the following four-part test. To qualify for action, an issue should be:

- (1) **Immediate.** Five year plans don't appeal to many people. Nothing is more deadly to an organization than becoming a futuristic debating society. Select an issue that affects people NOW, and will benefit them immediately if it is resolved.
- (2) **Specific.** A big general category like "housing" includes such issues as absentee landlords, code enforcement, zoning regulations, condominium conversions, mortgage or insurance redlining, public or subsidized housing, displacements, etc. Choose an issue that is specific and concrete and that affects people in their daily lives.
- (3) **Realizable.** A wonderful goal, such as eliminating slum housing in your city, is not within the scope of a single neighborhood organization. Neither is a campaign to halt the production of nuclear weapons. If the goal is not realizable, don't do anything about it. Focus on issues your neighborhood can do something about.
- (4) **Actionable.** Remember that people are power. The issue must attract a lot of people. Instead of deciding on the most morally significant issue, pick an issue that will attract widespread neighborhood volunteer support. A holier-than-thou attitude isn't an effective spur to action. Effective action in a neighborhood organization depends on dealing realistically with the legitimate self-interest of the people in the community.



KNOWING THE PROCESS

Another weakness of some neighborhood volunteers is their unwillingness to acquire a grasp of the processes of government. Too often they can't be bothered with the grimy machinery by which the public business gets done. They are content to "leave that to the politicians". But people who control the course of events leave nothing to the politicians. Often they must become politicians themselves.

And it isn't in politics only that high-minded citizens shy away from the nuts and bolts of action. In every other field of practical action they show the same distaste for the unglamorous details by which victories are won or lost.

And it is always disastrous. Significant neighborhood change is accomplished by men and women volunteers with a vision in their heads and a monkey wrench in their hands. Ideals without a program are a fantasy. And a program without organization is a hoax.

Part of the reason for these failures of high-minded citizens is self-indulgence. They feel so noble just "fighting the good fight" that they find reward even in defeat. And they often seem to believe - if only unconsciously - that high-mindedness is a substitute for professional skill in doing battle, that only the wicked need good lawyers.

No wonder they lose so often.



COMMUNICATING WITH THE PUBLIC

Effective communication is the most powerful weapon of a neighborhood organization. The special interest group usually works behind closed doors. It rarely reveals (or wants to reveal) what goes on in the back room. In contrast, the neighborhood group wants to tell the whole story - what's at stake, who stands to gain or lose, who's making what deals.

The neighborhood organization must seek out and translate into clear language the information that the public needs to have on any given issue. The story must be told in the mass media. Your members must talk to reporters about it, discuss it in their church, business or professional groups, talk to their friends about it. The issue must be dramatized. If the neighborhood is apathetic, it must be aroused. If there is already concern, it must be channeled.

When you get right down to it, there are only two kinds of power - money and people. And because money is in short supply in most neighborhood volunteer organizations, success depends on the group's ability to mobilize and use its people power.



BUILDING ALLIANCES

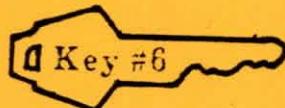
Another basic rule for effective neighborhood action is to form alliances with other community organizations. New citizens groups sprout like blades of grass after a spring rain. And they are of little value in fighting major battles unless those with common objectives work together.

It isn't easily accomplished. Organizational vanity creeps into the noblest organizations. Each group has its own version of what is important, what the solutions are, and what constitutes an unacceptable compromise.

The most effective alliances occur when groups of similar purpose set up

ad hoc arrangements to work together on a specific issue. Longer term alliances are virtually impossible. They invite the creation of "coordinating committees" and other exercises in futility. The ad hoc alliance may consist of nothing more than an agreement among representatives of various groups to meet weekly as a fight approaches. The minimum purpose is to share information. But a division of labor usually emerges as each group sees that it can serve the common purpose in some specially effective way.

A neighborhood volunteer group should also make the most of allies within the institution it is trying to affect. There are many public officials, elected and appointed, who want very much to improve the institutions in which they find themselves, and who would welcome the helping hand of a neighborhood ally. A neighborhood group makes a grave mistake if it imagines that it is so right - and so righteous - that it can fight the good fight all alone. The same thing also holds for private organizations. Remember, bankers and business people also live in neighborhoods, and an enlightened percentage of them are often as frustrated by the system as you are.



USING YOUR MEMBERSHIP

The goal of neighborhood organization is not a big membership but an active membership that multiplies its effectiveness by reaching out into the community. There are some organizations that number their members in millions, yet have little influence because their membership is inert. Such organizations are usually long established, complacent, and routine-ridden. The formula for organizational vitality in a neighborhood volunteer group is a smaller number of genuinely active volunteers.

And activity in members is directly related to form of organization. It is odd but true that some neighborhood organizations that profess an interest in action are not in fact organized for action. Some, though asserting an interest in action, are organized essentially for study and discussion. Others appear to be organized chiefly as social clubs. Still others have a mode of organization that serves primarily to keep the members busy with organizational housekeeping, committee chores, internal politics, and the interminable passing of resolutions. Some neighborhood groups either talk themselves to death or bureaucratize themselves into a state of paralysis. It is a devil of a job to get action out of an organization that isn't designed for action. If you want an active volunteer membership, you have to give them something to do. If the only reason people have for coming to your meetings is to hear a "name" speaker, then you've got a lecture society, not a neighborhood organization.



REACHING OUT

Something important remains to be said about reaching out to the people

in your neighborhood. Significant change depends on reaching the middle range of opinion in the community. It isn't easily done because perception of the need for neighborhood action begins with a few individuals who are sufficiently farsighted to anticipate the problems that lie ahead and to propose solutions. Such avant garde people naturally hope that the truth they see will gain wider acceptance, but they would not have seen that truth in the first place had they not been more independent minded than their neighbors. And many of them, because of that very independence of mind, are rather contemptuous (consciously or not) of the more conformist middle range of opinion. They are rarely conscious of the dilemma this poses: for their ideas to be widely accepted they must convince a large segment of the community of which they are contemptuous. And since contempt isn't a particularly winning attitude in a leader, they often end up antagonizing the very people they are trying to convert to volunteer involvement.

The neighborhood movement can't afford such self-indulgence. It must acknowledge - and not grudgingly - that the active voluntary participation of the middle is crucial to its success.

The task of educating people in the middle of the political spectrum to the problems and challenges facing our neighborhoods is bound to be difficult. Such education must be carried on in a climate that is seething with political movements, special interests, conflicting ideologies, slogans, battle cries, and deep-rooted prejudice. Some of the choices facing the residents of our neighborhoods require a fairly deep understanding of what we face as a society, and anyone promoting that kind of understanding must compete with opponents pursuing far shallower objectives, opponents who will not hesitate to play upon anxiety, hatred, fear, prejudice, and the desire for instant gain.

One favorable circumstance is that over the past generation the middle segment of our population has become more educated and aware than ever before. This is a consequence not only of formal education but of the heightened awareness that comes from living in a communications-saturated world. This increased education and heightened awareness make it difficult for people to continue the old unthinking acceptance of party labels, closed door politics and "expert" plans. Their minds have been opened to larger realities and opportunities.

But no group as politically, culturally, and economically diverse as a city neighborhood moves of its own volition. It responds to an active ingredient within it, a leadership element that can turn that awareness into voluntary action.

A FINAL WORD

One thing I have discovered is that when neighborhood people see an opportunity to act constructively they are capable of great enthusiasm and dedication.

Some critics, it is true, have still not accepted the idea of constructive neighborhood voluntary action. They contend that neighborhoods are concerned only with stopping change and blocking the "march of progress". But I do not accept the assumption that neighborhood organizations are basically negative and concerned solely with their narrow self-interest. I have seen too many neighborhood groups that possess a sense of vision of a better society to

accept that narrow view. I have talked with too many neighborhood leaders who are committed to justice and the opening up of the decision-making process to accept the critics attempt to label them as enemies of progress. Neighborhood leaders do not see progress in terms of skyscrapers and expressways. Their concept of progress is the progress of democracy - the belief that people have a right to be involved in the decisions that affect their lives and their neighborhoods.

Who are these people who have the ability to perceive and the courage to act on this vision of grassroots democracy? They are to be found in every social class and every segment of our society. They aren't necessarily the best known people in their neighborhoods, the ones in the political spotlight. But they are the natural builders of community - the architects of the political and moral order.

It would be a lot easier to describe - and to dramatize - the constituency of our neighborhood groups if the members fitted some familiar stereotype or category. If only such volunteers were all liberals or conservatives or all of one political party. Or if only they used familiar slogans or shared some easily identified ideology. But they don't. What they do share is a concern for their neighborhoods, their cities, and their nation.

A major task of our neighborhood leaders is to persuade people that they can and should be active in the community, that their volunteer involvement can make a difference. And the first goal of these leaders should be to open up the process to all the people in their neighborhood. It would be a serious mistake to suppose that the problems facing our neighborhoods can be solved by any one group of people, no matter how high-minded and well meaning. Any group that makes that mistake will end up imagining itself a new elite - and that would be a sad end for the neighborhood movement. No one can know what segment of the community will - if given a voice - play a creative volunteer role in bringing new issues to light or forcing us to face up to crucial problems of our future. The doors must remain open for all the elements in our neighborhoods to have their say.

The people who care about their neighborhoods must know that their contributions and ideas are needed and welcome. We are not dealing here with an elite possessing an aristocratic consciousness of role. Nor with a managerial or military caste in which the members are marked by rank, income or title. The actual and potential volunteers we're talking about are scattered throughout our neighborhoods - a lawyer here, an auto mechanic there, a homemaker, a teacher, a salesman.

They need encouragement. And they need organization. One of the problems plaguing people in our neighborhoods is that they are not happy with traditional politics. This, I believe, is a problem that can solve itself. As the neighborhood movement continues to emerge as a political force, it will call forth leaders worthy of it - leaders like you, who can bring our political and governmental institutions back to life, make them responsive and accountable, and keep them honest. It's a big job, but if you don't do it, who will?

Other Yellowfire Press publications on neighborhood volunteering are Meanwhile Back at the Neighborhood, Volunteers in Neighborhoods: An Introduction, and Working With the Neighborhood. See catalog, please.