

Minneapolis officials continue to dismantle citizen participation

City Council centralizes control of funding

Future allocations to neighborhoods are still unclear

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Cities in the U.S. and abroad continue to covet what Minneapolis officials are busy dismantling.

Through two 10-year phases, Minneapolis' Neighborhood Revitalization Program (NRP) has funded resident-prioritized improvements while leveraging tens of thousands of volunteer hours and additional dollars through the work of independent organizations representing all 81 neighborhoods. The NRP has been recognized by the United Nations as a "best practice" for improving urban living environments, and NRP staff were invited to present on citizen empowerment at recent international conferences in Boston and Toronto, where attendees would be surprised at the latest chapter unfolding in Minneapolis.

Against the urging of the community through an extensive series of public hearings and community meetings, the Minneapolis City Council voted on September 26 to centralize control of the NRP under a new City department overseen by the City Coordinator, who is appointed by the Mayor and City Council, for the next and 3rd phase of NRP funding. Since 1990, the NRP has been governed by a policy board comprised of multiple jurisdictions including the City, Hennepin County, the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board, the Minneapolis Public Library, Minneapolis Public Schools, the State Legislature, and Minneapolis neighborhoods.

12th Ward Council Member Sandy Colvin Roy was in the minority voting against the Council actions, stating, "you cannot centralize creativity." While the current administration at City Hall acknowledged in its *Framework for the Future* document that citizen participation is a basic right, and that the capacity to organize is a basic city service, Mayor R.T. Rybak and many council members have demonstrated a desire to rein-in the investment power and control enjoyed by Minneapolis residents since 1990. NRP Director Bob Miller has stated that he expects civic participation to plummet in proportion to residents' loss of resources and influence.

The City Council also voted on September 26 to create a new *Neighborhood and Community Engagement Commission* to be comprised of 8 residents selected by neighborhood organizations, 7 appointed by City Hall, and 1 appointed by the Park and Recreation Board. This commission will take over for the NRP Policy Board in reviewing neighborhood spending plans and making recommendations regarding governance of the 3rd Phase of the NRP, albeit with much less power. The NRP Policy Board was able to hire, evaluate, and fire the NRP Director, for example, whereas the City Council voted on Sept. 26 that the City Coordinator alone has the power to hire, evaluate, and fire the Assistant City Coordinator who will take over the NRP Director's role for Phase 3.

Revenue for the 3rd phase of the NRP will begin in 2011, through tax increment districts authorized this year by the State Legislature. These revenue generation sources are similar to those of Phases 1 and 2, but with at least one significant difference. Eleventh-hour changes were

made to the new legislation—on behalf of City of Minneapolis officials by sympathetic state lawmakers—to direct the tax increment dollars toward “neighborhood revitalization purposes,” instead of the original authors' intended target, the “Neighborhood Revitalization Program (NRP).” This change of one word—*program* to *purposes*—gives City Hall the discretion to spend some, or all, of these “neighborhood revitalization” dollars on its new *Department of Neighborhood and Community Relations* over their 10-year life, instead of investing the money in Minneapolis neighborhoods through the NRP. The Mayor’s proposed 2009 budget calls for \$8 Million/year from the tax increment districts to be put toward the City’s new *Department of Neighborhood and Community Relations*, administration of the NRP, and allocations to each neighborhood, but without specifying how much, if any, will go toward each. Through its annual budget hearings and debate process, the City Council is expected to make final decisions on these figures before the end of 2008.