

Greensboro's Enterprise Community Strategic Plan

Mike Cowhig

In the summer of 1994, Greensboro was one of eight North Carolina cities that applied for the federal Enterprise Community (EC) grant program, a major economic and community development initiative of the Clinton Administration. The EC program offered cities nearly \$3 million in Social Service Block Grant funds. These funds, unlike entitlement programs, applied to a broad range of activities and came with few strings attached. The only stipulation was that the funds be used to help reduce poverty in "distressed" neighborhoods.

Charlotte was the only North Carolina city that was awarded an Enterprise Community grant among the approximately 100 recipient cities nationwide. Although Greensboro did not win a grant, it found the application process to be a rewarding experience in a number of ways.

Enterprise Community Program is Atypical

According to the EC application guidebook, "This program is the first step in rebuilding communities in America's poverty-stricken inner cities and rural heartlands. It is designed to empower people and communities all across this nation by inspiring Americans to work together to create jobs and opportunity."

The application was unlike typical government applications in that it contained only a few pages of forms to fill out. However, it required a strategic plan describing in detail the measures the community would take to reduce poverty and the benchmarks it

would use to measure progress. The strategic plan had to include measures of progress like realistic estimates of the number of jobs that would be created. The application required that residents of "distressed" neighborhoods participate in developing the strategic plan, and that the plan include a mechanism for continuous neighborhood-based planning. Clearly, more than a perfunctory citizen participation exercise was expected of Enterprise applicants.

Four key principles underlie the Enterprise philosophy:

1. *Economic Opportunity*

Economic opportunity means jobs and work, with emphasis on programs that create new jobs, provide training for upwardly mobile jobs, or help people to start businesses. The kinds of jobs and businesses created are important. Ideally, the jobs should offer opportunity for advancement, and the businesses should be located in underserved neighborhoods. In the Enterprise model, neighborhood revitalization starts with the economic independence and self-sufficiency of residents.

2. *Sustainable Community Development*

Sustainable community development refers to the physical environment of neighborhoods. Are they safe? Is housing in good condition and suitable for families? Is transportation available to residents? Are health care and other human services accessible? Are learning resources and employment opportunities available in the community? These are basic needs that most people take for granted, but for most residents of EC neighborhoods they represent barriers to economic well-being. The strategic plan should dem-

Mike Cowhig, AICP, is a Community Planner with the City of Greensboro Department of Housing and Community Development. Cowhig was Team Leader for Greensboro's Enterprise Community Strategic Planning Process.

onstrate that the community is willing to bring the necessary resources to bear to meet these needs.

3. *Community-Based Partnership*

Broad participation from across the community is fundamental to the Enterprise approach to neighborhood revitalization. The Enterprise partnership starts with those who will be directly affected—neighborhood residents. They are the ones with the best perspective on what will work for their neighborhood, and therefore they must be involved in the planning process. Next, the partnership should include stakeholders in the neighborhood such as community-based organizations, housing and community development nonprofits, and city and county departments and agencies. Finally, the partnership must include those who can channel resources to the neighborhood—political leaders, employers, churches, philanthropies, and educational institutions.

4. *Strategic Vision For Change*

The strategic plan must set realistic and measurable goals along with performance standards that reflect a shared vision of how the community intends to respond to the needs of EC residents. For example, a commitment on the part of the local job training program to prepare 25 EC residents to take skilled manufacturing jobs should be coupled with a commitment by a local manufacturer to hire those residents once they have successfully completed training. EC funds might be used to expand the program so that an additional 25 residents could receive training and be placed in jobs.

Removing Barriers to Change

To assist communities in implementing their strategic plans, the Clinton Administration promised to remove burdensome programmatic regulations whenever possible, saying, “To accomplish this goal we will work with all communities that have submitted a strategic plan for change, even if they do not re-

ceive Empowerment Zone or Enterprise Community designation. We will strive to overcome programmatic, regulatory, and statutory impediments to encourage more effective economic, human, physical, environmental, and community development activities.” It is left to the local community to identify those rules and regulations that create roadblocks to economic success. The example most often cited is public housing requirements that discourage residents from taking better paying jobs for fear of losing their eligibility. Grassroots participation in the planning process is essential in order to learn how these rules affect people’s lives.

The Crew of the Enterprise

In Greensboro, the Department of Housing and Community Development was assigned the task of preparing the Enterprise Community grant application. A late decision to apply meant that the department was faced with completing a full blown strategic plan in a little over three months. The project team, nicknamed the “crew of the Enterprise,” recognized the importance of engaging the community in the strategic planning process and worked hard to ensure that they provided for meaning-

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ful public participation.

In one respect the timing could not have been better for the department since the application project followed on the heels of a management study that included training in team building techniques. The EC project gave department staff an opportunity to put the teamwork skills they had learned into practice. For a few months at least, the entire department functioned as a single team, with planners, administrative staff, and managers all working together to meet the project deadline. Enterprise was also an opportunity to cultivate interdepartmental and inter-agency team building since help was needed from other city departments, county government, and social service agencies.

Another benefit reported by Greensboro planners was partnership building that bridged social, politi-

cal, and professional boundaries. Housing and Community Development staff have always worked closely with certain agencies and organizations in the community in carrying out the department's mission. During Enterprise, existing working relationships were strengthened and new relationships were created. Moreover, the project brought together for the first time all of those organizations that have a common mission to help the poor—social service agencies, nonprofit organizations, community development corporations, the public housing authority, city departments, colleges, churches, and charitable organizations. Enterprise opened people's eyes to the potential for collaboration and information sharing among these groups.

The Application Process

The first step in the application process was to determine if Greensboro met eligibility requirements. This was done by comparing census data with poverty thresholds. While the phrase "poverty-stricken" seemed too strong to describe any of Greensboro's neighborhoods, census figures showed that there was an area near the downtown with a significant concentration of low-income households. Five contiguous census tracts were found to have poverty rates roughly three times as high as the city as a whole—36% versus 12%. These areas contain most of the larger public housing communities and are the target of most of the city's neighborhood revitalization and affordable housing efforts.

Once the eligibility question was answered and the decision to apply was made, planners began to devise a strategy for recruiting broad participation from a cross section of the community. The first step was to invite staff from city and county departments, nonprofit organizations, human service agencies, and community leaders to a series of briefings about the Enterprise Community initiative. From these briefings a consensus emerged about what shape the planning process would take. Emphatically, it would be a process that effectively reached the grassroots level.

A task force was formed to oversee the project. It included individuals who control vital community resources such as politicians, employers, and colleges and universities, as well as representatives from community-based organizations. The task force was subdivided into four working committees focusing on economic development, community development, education, and human services. In addition to weekly meetings, the task force hosted three public work-

shops in the EC area. The public workshops were advertised in the community with the help of the police department's Neighborhood Resource Centers and the Greensboro Housing Authority's resident councils who distributed leaflets to more than 7,000 households. Transportation and child care were provided to anyone who needed it, and the workshops were well attended.

Despite this effort to involve residents, there was still dissatisfaction among some task force members. They pointed out that neighborhood residents were not well represented on the working committees. And indeed, while open to the public and held in a convenient location, these weekly meetings were dominated by staff from city and county departments, nonprofit organizations, and human service agencies. There was persistent grumbling that this was "business as usual" with the bureaucrats controlling the process. The community development committee in particular spent the majority of its time trying to resolve the issue of participation. In the end, this committee convinced the rest of the task force that a large portion of the budget should be reserved for programs designed by residents through a neighborhood-based planning process.

In response to the concern that certain segments of the community were not well represented, a series of workshops were scheduled in the neighborhoods at times more convenient to residents. The "mini-workshops" as they were called, were held at homeless shelters, branch libraries, public housing communities, and community centers. The meetings were facilitated by an employee of one of the community-based nonprofits who is well respected in the neighborhoods. The mini-workshops targeted youth, homeless people, young mothers with children, and others who would not likely have participated otherwise. They gave planners an opportunity to hear firsthand about the problems of crime, drugs, homelessness, and joblessness. They heard young mothers complain that they could not take their children to a nearby park for fear of gangs, and elderly residents told of being afraid to leave their homes because of drug activity on the sidewalks. They listened to a young homeless man argue that the hours for admittance to the homeless shelter should be more flexible to accommodate his work schedule.

The task force meetings were not always pleasant and occasionally harsh words were exchanged. Local planners and social workers were confronted by longtime residents with deep resentment about past programs like Urban Renewal, which they argued had

been imposed on their neighborhoods without their consent. There were turf issues among agencies and organizations, and some fledgling organizations clearly felt threatened by the process. Others objected to the City's role as facilitator, and the complaint "this is more of the same" was heard often. Nevertheless, after twelve weeks of meetings, a plan emerged. While far from perfect, the plan was unanimously endorsed by the participants.

Strategic Plan Highlights

"The Enterprise Community strategic planning process has revealed Greensboro as a community on the threshold of reinventing itself as a 21st century city." The summary report for Greensboro's strategic plan begins with this bit of hyperbole which reflects the overarching theme that people should be empowered to help themselves. "Reinventing" within this context refers to the evolution of the relationship between helpers and helped: "To achieve their vision, the residents of Greensboro's Enterprise Community would place a high priority on getting good jobs that pay a living wage for meaningful work, and on starting their own businesses. They also place a high priority on empowering people to help themselves, on educational and other programs to help children and youth to grow up as productive citizens, on partnerships of local organizations, and on public safety, good housing, and accessible child care."

The goals of Greensboro's strategic plan were developed in four areas: community development, education, human services, and economic development. Community development goals included improving housing and public safety and fostering neighborhood self-help. Education goals included provisions for more accessible learning, mentoring, and other efforts to keep teenagers in school. Human services goals included increased self-sufficiency, better access to services, improved health programs,

and care for children and the elderly. Economic development goals included job training and employment networking, efforts to assist small and neighborhood businesses, and improved child care and transportation.

Neighborhood empowerment was the cornerstone of Greensboro's strategic plan and reflected the debate over who makes decisions for neighborhoods: "A gradual understanding emerged that a neighborhood empowerment process must come from the Enterprise Community initiative, and it must be strongly grassroots driven. Consensus emerged that neighborhood empowerment is a mega-goal that underlies all other goals. Other priorities included "real" jobs that

are meaningful, with decent pay, since this is a key to self-esteem and solving problems such as crime; financing for new businesses because they will create jobs; ensuring that neighborhood residents are actively involved in planning and staffing programs; programs to involve youth in solving community problems; and the creation of partnerships of local organizations that can make a difference."

While the goal of neighborhood empowerment received the lion's share of the funds in Greensboro's proposed budget, the task force was reluctant to design specific programs until a planning process could be put in place that involved residents. Past programs had failed, they reasoned, because this involvement was missing on the front end. They recognized that it would take time, but proposed building upon the neighborhood organizing work of groups such as the Greensboro City Wide Poor People's Organization, Project Greensboro, Project Homestead, Bennett College Community Development Corporation, and the Greensboro Episcopal Housing Ministry.

Greensboro has an enviable record in the area of affordable housing, yet the strategic plan recommended that these efforts be redoubled because of the growing need. The plan cited Eastside Park, a neighborhood revitalization project sponsored by Neighborhoods United of Greensboro, Inc., a coal-

The following is a breakdown of how funds would have been allocated if Greensboro had received an Enterprise Community grant:

Neighborhood Empowerment	\$ 1,200,000
Small Business Development	\$ 500,000
Substance Abuse and Other Key Health Issues	\$ 400,000
Community Access to Services	\$ 350,000
Mobile Educational Services	\$ 150,000
Employment Support (child care and transportation)	\$ 150,000
Substandard Housing Prevention	\$ 100,000
Community Learning Centers	\$ 100,000

tion of five Rotary Clubs, as a model for future neighborhood revitalization efforts. Neighborhoods United and the City of Greensboro partnered with nine nonprofits to renovate houses and provide the services needed to restore this once vibrant community. Substandard and boarded-up houses were another key community development issue in that they represent wasted resources and discourage home ownership and neighborhood revitalization. The plan points out the need for North Carolina enabling legislation that would give local housing inspectors more authority to correct housing conditions. Expanded and improved community policing was seen as the answer to neighborhood safety issues. Greensboro's pilot Police Neighborhood Resource Centers in four public housing communities has proven very successful and should be expanded. This program relies on communication and partnership building with neighborhood groups in fighting crime.

The education strategy basically calls for taking advantage of Greensboro's wealth of educational resources, from its public school system to its five colleges and universities, as well as Guilford Technical Community College. The strategy emphasizes mentoring and supportive services for young children to help them before they have problems in school. It also includes the creation of accessible and non-structured environments where young people and adults can be exposed to new technologies and information tools and can seek career guidance. Education Committee members were especially interested in the role of technology, hence the recommendation for mobile learning services, such as the Tech Mobile or Computer Mobile. The plan recognizes the Chavis Lifelong Learning Library as a model for community resource centers. At Chavis, a branch library in the proposed EC area, a coalition of 60 organizations work to promote reading and literacy and provide an array of supportive educational services.

Human service strategies focused on fixing programs that have built-in disincentives to self-sufficiency or that actually encourage dependency. For example, in some instances welfare benefits can be lost during job training or before the individual has become self-sufficient. Accessibility to services was also identified as an issue. However, when it was suggested that outreach facilities be placed in the EC neighborhoods, residents objected strenuously that they would further stigmatize their neighborhoods and hurt revitalization efforts. From that point the focus shifted to information about services, transportation and access to services, and affordability. The plan

recommends that human service information be compiled, along with information about housing, job training, child care, transportation, and more, and be distributed to residents. A computerized Community Information Network could be operated from resource centers located in existing neighborhood facilities such as libraries or recreation centers. Other parts of the human service strategy include a coordinated application system for all human services, and training for neighborhood residents to operate affordable day care, transportation, and other services. The final piece of the human services strategy is to address the special needs of youth and the elderly, and to involve them in planning, developing, and implementing solutions.

The Future

Although Greensboro was not awarded an EC grant, a number of activities are underway that are either directly or indirectly related to the strategic planning process:

Consolidated Planning and the Community Resource Board

The City's Consolidated Planning process began shortly after the EC application project and built upon the strategic plan. The Consolidated Plan pulls together three Federal programs and two locally-funded programs administered by the Department of Housing and Community Development in a comprehensive and integrated strategy to address the needs of all the city's neighborhoods. The cornerstone is a five-year strategic plan that continues the neighborhood-based planning strategy that was launched by the Enterprise Community initiative. The primary goals are to build the problem-solving capacity of neighborhood organizations in order to bring all of the community's resources to bear in addressing these problems. The plan is predicated upon collaboration between educational institutions, human service agencies, nonprofit organizations, churches, City and County departments, and charitable organizations. The Community Resource Board (CRB) was created in 1995 to make recommendations to the City Council regarding the allocation of housing and community development resources. Conceived in a climate of heightened competition, the CRB is responsible for ensuring that increasingly limited resources are used as efficiently as possible and are allocated equitably.

Mayor's Committee on Community Economic Development

In the winter of 1995, Greensboro was invited to participate in the National League of Cities' Urban Poverty and Cities Initiative, an experiment in team building to enable communities to create public-private partnerships. A team from Greensboro composed of city staff and community leaders attended a workshop hosted by the League and the City of Charlotte, along with teams from Boston, Little Rock, and Oklahoma City. That experience led to the creation of the Mayor's Committee on Community Economic Development. The stated goal of this committee is "to create the public will that is essential in order to begin the task of addressing the economic needs of neighborhoods. This partnership must include corporate as well as community leaders working collaboratively to link residents of poor neighborhoods with the economic resources of our community." Over the last year the committee has been working on a strategy to engage the business and corporate leadership in a neighborhood economic development program by convincing them that the well-being of the entire community is jeopardized when even one neighborhood suffers from poverty.

Community Information Broker Project

Because Greensboro submitted an EC application, the City was invited to participate in a unique telecommunications study called the Community Information Broker project sponsored by the Department of Commerce and the North Carolina Client and Community Development Center. The project is exploring ways that telecommunications and the information highway can assist communities in implementing their EC strategic plans. The premise is that residents of poor neighborhoods do not share in the economic benefits of electronic networking and other telecommunications technologies. The project is testing a new model—community information brokers. These are individuals who would serve as networking intermediaries for their communities. They would demonstrate the potential of the information highway to enhance the capacity of organizations and agencies that serve residents of poor neighborhoods, since this technology is usually beyond their reach. The project was a good fit for Greensboro since the EC strategic plan emphasized the potential of computer technology and the information highway to create economic opportunity for EC residents.

Statewide Networking

Greensboro is participating in a networking initiative of the North Carolina Division of Community Assistance for EC applicant communities. The Division, which is part of the North Carolina Department of Commerce, played a key role in the application process for the state's Enterprise Community applicants. Division staff continue to look for ways to help unsuccessful EC applicants implement their strategic plans using other resources. The Division has hosted several meetings (some via teleconference) where staff from the various communities can exchange information about progress they have made in implementing their strategic plans, and they can learn about other federal and state programs. Currently, the Division of Community Assistance is partnering with the University of North Carolina Center for Urban and Regional Studies on a grant proposal on behalf of the state's EC cities to the Environmental Protection Agency's Brownfields Economic Redevelopment Initiative. The project will study the economic redevelopment potential of contaminated, vacant, or underutilized sites in center city neighborhoods. The project will focus on sites that could have economic development benefits for residents of EC neighborhoods.

Summary

Although Greensboro was not one of the cities awarded an Enterprise Community grant, the city benefited from applying. City planners now have an action plan for the economic revitalization of poor neighborhoods that can serve the community for years to come. At its heart is the concept of helping people to help themselves. With this plan in hand, community-based organizations and residents can seek assistance for their neighborhoods from any number of sources. Many of the recommendations in the plan are very practical solutions to neighborhood problems that do not necessarily cost a lot of money, such as seeking stronger housing code legislation. The EC strategic planning process demonstrated the advantages of collaboration and was a catalyst for the formation of an informal coalition of neighborhood organizations and residents. Most importantly, this partnership includes local government departments and agencies as well as the leadership of the private sector. **CP**