

The City of Charlotte's Neighborhood Matching Grants Fund

Keva L. Walton

Charlotte's Neighborhood Matching Grants Fund is an excellent example of how city government is reengineering itself to better serve all citizens. The Fund is a planning tool that reaches into low- and moderate-income neighborhoods, spurring citizen involvement and leveraging private investments. Consequently, the Charlotte neighborhood-based organizations targeted by the Fund grow stronger and take a more active role in improving the quality of life in their neighborhoods.

History and Background

In January 1992, the Charlotte City Council appropriated \$650,000 to establish the Neighborhood Matching Grants Fund. Patterned after a similar initiative in Seattle, Washington, the Fund is an innovative concept that provides matching grant funds to qualified neighborhood-based organizations. These grants permit the organizations to undertake projects that make their neighborhoods better places to live, work, play, and shop. The goals of the Neighborhood Matching Grants Fund are to:

- Build the capacity of and participation in neighborhood-based residential and business associations,
- Allow neighborhoods to determine priorities for improvements in their own areas,

- Leverage citizen involvement and resources to revitalize and reinvest in low- and moderate-income neighborhoods, and
- Stimulate the development of partnerships between the City of Charlotte, resident and business associations, and other community organizations, resulting in projects and products that benefit targeted neighborhoods.

The Neighborhood Matching Grants Fund is one of the tools developed by the City of Charlotte in a city-wide effort to improve the quality of life in the city as a whole. However, the Fund focuses specifically on an area known as the City Within a City (CWAC). This 60 square-mile area in the heart of Charlotte has a population of over 145,000. If CWAC were a North Carolina city, it would be the state's fifth largest. The 73 neighborhoods comprising the City Within a City have the following characteristics:

- 1 of every 6 families lives in poverty.
- 1 of every 7 households is headed by a single female.
- 20 of the 73 neighborhoods experience unemployment rates greater than 10% (while the rate for Mecklenburg County fluctuates between 3% - 4%).
- 21 of the neighborhoods experience unemployment rates between 6% - 9%.
- 44% of the homes are owner occupied and 56% are rented (for Charlotte, the home ownership rate is 62% and 38% is rental).
- 31% of adults age 25 or older do not have a high

Keva Walton is a native of Raleigh, N.C. He has a Bachelor of Science degree in Urban and Regional Planning from East Carolina University and a Master of Public Administration degree from the University of North Carolina, Charlotte. He worked for the City of Charlotte in various capacities for over eight years. Since June 1993, he has been the City's Neighborhood Matching Grants Coordinator.

school diploma (vs. 12% for Charlotte as a whole).

- A majority of the neighborhoods have high crime rates (a 1992 report indicated that 75% of drug arrests were made in CWAC).

These facts demonstrate the urgency of these neighborhoods' problems and the pressing need to address them. By providing an opportunity for residents in low- to moderate-income neighborhoods to organize and take proactive steps towards making a difference in their surroundings, the City realizes both short- and long-term returns on its investments. Immediate and recognizable differences occur in the short-term. Long-term, the program develops empowered citizens, who are able to communicate effectively with their city government and who take ownership of and pride in their neighborhoods. It is this long-term return on the City's investment that will positively impact the statistics for the City Within A City. Because Charlotte's City Council recognizes this fact, the Neighborhood Matching Grants Fund is identified as a Crime Prevention Strategy in the City's recently adopted Community Safety Plan. This five-year plan outlines a strategic approach to address the City's crime problems. As neighborhood organizations in qualifying areas recognize their potential to have a meaningful impact on the destiny of their neighborhoods, planning goals for many of these areas are realized and the City's quality of life improves.

How the Neighborhood Matching Grant Fund Works

Any neighborhood organization within the City of Charlotte that is located in a 1990 census tract where the median household income is below the City's median of \$36,654 may apply for a matching grant. Neighborhood-based associations (residential or business) are eligible for the program if a majority of the association's members residing in or operating businesses in the neigh-

borhood are eligible. The association's purpose must focus on improving the quality of life within the neighborhood.

Eligible projects must meet the following criteria:

- Provide a public, neighborhood benefit,
- Involve neighborhood people in the identification, planning, and execution of the proposed activity,
- Be completed within a 12 month time frame, and
- Conform to applicable health safety and legal regulations.

Projects cannot duplicate an existing public or private program or support an ongoing service or operating budget. There are four project categories: Neighborhood Improvement, Neighborhood Organizing and Organizational Development, Crime and Public Safety, and Neighborhood Education, Recreation, and Cultural Initiatives.

The Neighborhood Improvement category includes projects that improve the aesthetic appearance of a neighborhood. Funded projects include landscaping improvements and installation of trash receptacles and sculpture in public areas. Neighborhood Organizing and Organizational Development projects help start or strengthen a neighborhood organization. Leadership training for organization officers and establishing by-laws for the neighborhood organization are examples of projects in this category. Newly forming organiza-



Residents of the Historic North Charlotte Neighborhood Association work to create public art in Charlotte's emerging art district.

tions are eligible for a one-time matching grant of \$2 from the City of Charlotte for every \$1 the neighborhood organizations contribute.

The Crime and Public Safety projects focus on improving public safety and reducing crime within a neighborhood. Signage informing neighborhood residents where to call when witnessing drug activity and improving the visibility of house numbering in a condominium neighborhood are two examples of projects funded in this category. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Community Police officers are involved in assisting residents in planning and implementing some of these efforts. The community policing effort in general is very involved with many of the organizations seeking matching grant funds. The Neighborhood Education, Recreation, and Cultural Initiatives is a broad category. After-school tutoring programs, computer literacy programs for youth and adults, and senior citizen exercise programs are examples of projects that have been funded.

Projects are not required to fall into one specific category. For example, one neighborhood used Matching Grant funds to renovate an abandoned volunteer fire department for use as a neighborhood community center. This single project addressed aspects of each category. Improving the abandoned structure was a "Neighborhood Improvement" project that dealt with "Crime and Public Safety" concerns by utilizing an abandoned structure that had the potential of attracting vagrants. The renovation project addressed "Neighborhood Organizational Development" by providing a permanent meeting facility for the neighborhood organization, as well as a facility in which "Neighborhood Educational, Recreational, and Cultural" activities could take place. Neighborhood organizations are encouraged to think of new and innovative ideas that meet Fund objectives and make a difference within their neighborhoods.

Matching The Grant Monies

The key component of this initiative is the requirement that neighborhood organizations provide a match equal to or greater than the funds requested. The matching criteria may be satisfied with volunteer labor (valued at \$10.00 per hour), cash, donations, or any combination of these. However, 25 percent of the total match must come from the neighborhood organization's own resources.

Efforts by neighborhoods to form partnerships with outside organizations are encouraged. Partnerships provide additional resources to assist neighborhoods in achieving planned projects. To help foster these relationships, the City hosts an annual Neighborhood Match-

ing Grants Partner Fair. This event provides an opportunity for neighborhoods, businesses, and organizations to network and form partnerships.

Reviewing Grant Applications and Assisting Applicants

Two separate teams review and make decisions on submitted grant applications. The Inter-Departmental team is comprised of several City staff members from various departments. They are responsible for reviewing all grant submissions and decisions on small grants (\$3,000 and less). The City-Wide Review team is a citizens board appointed by the Charlotte City Council. They are responsible for reviewing and making decisions on all large grants (between \$3,000 and \$25,000). Both teams bring skills and expertise to the review of applications and provide technical assistance to grant applicants. The teams also establish policy for the Fund.

Each team member is assigned to work with a grant applicant prior to the decision meeting. The team member contacts the applicant, makes any necessary site visits, and assists the applicant in resolving any outstanding issues relative to their neighborhood organization's grant request. At the decision meeting, the team member provides any additional information or clarification on his or her assigned grant request.

Team members also participate in pre-applications workshops. The workshops provide an opportunity for organizations interested in applying for a neighborhood matching grant to discuss project ideas, ask questions, and receive assistance in completing the grant application. The teams play a very active and important role in the success of the Fund.

Awarding the Grants

Matching grant requests are funded at two levels. Small grants of \$3,000 or less are awarded four times during the year, while large grants, ranging from \$3,000 to \$25,000 are awarded twice each year. Requests at either level are rated according to the following criteria, for a possible total of 100 points.

Quality of Match (10 possible points)

- Value of Match (0 - 5 points): Points are awarded based on a formula that calculates a point value for the amount of matching resources that a neighborhood organization will contribute to implement the planned project.
- Match well-documented (0 - 5 points): Points are



The Neighborhood Matching Grant Partner Fair provides neighborhood organizations and interested community partners an opportunity to network to form partnerships.

awarded based on how well the neighborhood organizations document their matching contribution.

Participation (35 possible points)

- **Broad Neighborhood Participation (0 - 25 points):** Points are awarded based on how well the neighborhood organization involves neighborhood residents in all phases of the planned project.
- **Additional Partners/Social Diversity (0 - 10 points):** Points are awarded based on how well the neighborhood organization has reached out to involve "partners" beyond the neighborhood organization to assist in implementing a planned project.

Project Need (15 possible points)

- **Low-Income Benefit (5 points):** Five points are awarded proposed activities for low-income neighborhoods or for projects which target low-income households.
- **Documented Need (0 - 10 points):** Points are awarded based on whether a project addresses a neighborhood need or problem recognized in a City report, plan, or other publicly defined study;

Project Design (40 possible points)

- **Cost effective, well planned, ready for implementa-**

tion (0 - 25 points): Points are awarded based on how well the neighborhood organization demonstrates that a planned project is ready to proceed if a grant is awarded. Clearly articulated goals, measurable objectives, and a defined time-frame for completion are key factors in awarding points for this criterion.

- **Project budget is reliable (0 - 10 points):** Points are awarded based on how well a neighborhood organization prepares a budget for the planned project.

A detailed line item budget with projected expenses and written cost estimates for the items needed to complete the project are key factors in awarding points in this criterion.

- **Innovation (0 - 5 points):** Points are awarded based on how the planned project proposes a new or creative approach in addressing an issue.

Success: One Neighborhood Example

To date, 96 projects totaling over \$450,000 have received approval for grant funds. A variety of neighborhood-initiated projects are in progress, ranging from landscaping enhancement and computer literacy programs to the renovation of existing structures for neighborhood use.

The Greenville Homeowners Association is a shining example of what can happen when neighborhood residents are committed to making things happen. This neighborhood organization successfully completed three neighborhood matching grants and is in the process of completing a fourth project. After canvassing the neighborhood, the Association found that computer literacy was a high priority for Greenville residents. The organization applied for its first matching grant and was awarded \$7,054 to implement a computer literacy program in their community.

For its match, the Greenville Homeowners Association obtained assistance from several local businesses.

One donated several desks for use in the program, while a computer trainer from a second business donated her professional skills to train several Greenville residents who in turn would train other residents. The value of the desks and the computer trainer's time counted toward the grant match. To fulfill their portion of the match, the first group of residents volunteered for training and then conducted training sessions for other residents. The computer lab is open on weekday evenings at the Greenville community center. Neighborhood residents receive first priority, but as openings become available, people outside the Greenville community may take advantage of the training.

In a second grant, the Greenville Homeowners Association applied for and were awarded a grant to purchase uniforms and musical equipment for the Greenville Community Combined Youth Marching Corps. With the items purchased, the marching corps of young people from the Greenville community traveled to a national drill team competition in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. The Greenville Corps was the only neighborhood-based entry in the competition. Groups from around the country and Canada participated. The Greenville Corps took top honors, winning first place for "Best All Around Performance." As a result of this victory, the Corps travels the region to perform for various functions. The success in Myrtle Beach resulted in an additional surprise for the Corps. A local music company acknowledged the diligence of this group by donating new musical equipment valued in excess of \$21,000 to the Corps.

Membership in the Greenville Community Combined Youth Marching Corps is earned. The youth must keep their grades up, participate in the afterschool tutoring/computer literacy training classes, and participate in community service projects. To date, there are over 50 young people involved. The Greenville Homeowners Association is evidence that residents in low- to moderate-income neighborhoods can and will take an active role in making positive changes for the betterment of their neighborhood and neighbors.

Next Steps

Work with organizations to further strengthen their capacities will continue through 1995. Increasing awareness of the Fund among newly formed neighborhood-based organizations is also a major focus area. Additionally, showcasing the many successes resulting from the diligent work of the City's neighborhood partners is of great importance. The Partner Fair of March 1995 paid special tribute to the many successful projects in Charlotte's neighborhoods with assistance from the Neighborhood Matching Grants Fund.

Beyond the process of awarding and receiving grant monies, the Neighborhood Matching Grants Fund is a catalyst that motivates, leverages resources, and invests in the City of Charlotte's future. Equally important is investing in the leaders of tomorrow and instilling a sense of community pride and activism. The Fund represents a commitment to making a significant, positive change in the lives of neighbors. The Fund helps ensure that each neighborhood has an opportunity to begin the journey toward recognizing its full potential. CP