

## **Legislative Agenda Topic: Neighborhoods & Resident Engagement**

**GOAL:** Promote civic engagement at the neighborhood and individual level

**ISSUES:** Madison is famous for its neighborhoods not only for their distinctive physical features and character but also for the engagement of their residents through Neighborhood Associations (NA). As policy makers, the Common Council relies on NAs to gather feedback and ideas, communicate city efforts, test ideas, and provide advice on development.

We honor NAs in established processes, especially with development proposals and traffic improvements.

Unfortunately, not all neighborhoods are blessed with a functioning, strong, or experienced NA, and some lack one at all. These neighborhoods are at a disadvantage in terms of how their residents participate in their city's government and growth or change.

**BACKGROUND:** Neighborhood qualities have a profound impact on residents. A recent study published in the journal of Science found that residents who moved to safer and wealthier neighborhoods from disadvantaged neighborhoods became both healthier and happier (though not wealthier). There is value in investing in safe and connected neighborhoods to build a stronger city.

**OPPORTUNITIES:** Neighborhood Associations and neighborhood planning processes offer an opportunity to fully engage residents in the local decision making process. Capacity building through the support of NAs, especially in those neighborhoods with non-existent or weaker NAs provides an opportunity to practice the activities that contribute to a robust and effective democracy. Residents who participate in NAs help strengthen community networks, build trust and social capital and practice collective problem solving.

**CHALLENGES:** The City of Madison is working to establish strong neighborhood leadership especially in disadvantaged communities through the Neighborhood Resource Teams, Neighborhood Centers and the direct support of neighborhood planners and other City of Madison staff. Special attention should be paid to provide diversity of options for engagement. In a working paper analyzing the barriers and benefits of civic engagement and volunteerism through the AmeriCorps program authors noted that "Individuals, and particularly poor minorities, with less education are less civically engaged." <sup>1</sup> They also found that efforts to increase civic engagement and participation in disadvantaged communities are more successful (bringing more volunteers into programs) if the programs and projects meet real needs and address serious issues which are important to the community.

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<sup>1</sup> The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement. Civic Engagement and the Disadvantaged: Challenges, Opportunities and Recommendations CIRCLE Working Paper #63, December 2008.

**STRATEGIES:**

Fully engage Madison residents in their City's activities and decisions. The macro-level is to create and use a robust Neighborhood Association system, accomplished through routine support and assessment of each neighborhood for minimum capacity and skills to effectively engage in city-neighborhood efforts.

Tactics, which may require budgetary allocations, include:

- 1) Biennial assessment of all areas of the city to determine if there is a neighborhood association. For those neighborhoods without a neighborhood association, a staff member from Planning (existing) or other areas (NRTs?) would be assigned to work with an Alder or other community leader to develop one.
- 2) Develop a curriculum and consult protocol for starting and sustaining NAs.
- 3) Engage NAs so that each neighborhood has a neighborhood plan no less than 10 years old.
- 4) Use neighborhood indicators, crime statistics, building codes and other records to prioritize attention.
- 5) Continue to provide the Neighborhood Roundtable.

The micro-level focuses on individual engagement by increasing ease and appeal for citizens to attend meetings for specific topics and join committees.

- 1) Review the processes for public testimony – remote vs. in person, time limits, ways to increase the ability of testifiers to ask questions, share with people the rules of the road in a routine way. Establish a citizen focus group to assist.
- 2) Establish a Subcommittee on Committee Recruitment (alders and mayoral rep?).
- 3) Continue to pursue budget conversations.

Given Madison's reliance and appreciation for resident engagement, the above activities are already underlying practices and values in our work, making this focus a policy area consistent with the Common Council's purview and ability to implement.

**MOVING FORWARD:**

**Relevant City Departments and Committees:**

Board of Estimates

City-County Liaison Committee

Common Council Organizational Committee

Downtown Coordinating Committee

Economic Development Committee

Education Committee

Long Range Transportation Planning  
Committee

Madison Arts Commission

Madison Public Library

Neighborhood Resource Teams

Board of Park Commissioners

Pedestrian/Bicycle/Motor Vehicle  
Commission

Plan Commission

Sustainable Madison Committee

Committee on Sweatfree Purchases

Transit & Parking Commission

Urban Design Commission

Zoning Board of Appeals

- Department of Civil Rights
- City Engineering
- Finance Department
- Fire Department
- Information Technology
- Monona Terrace
- Parking Operations
- Parks Division
- Planning & Community & Economic Development
- Police Department
- Public Health of Madison & Dane County
- Madison School District
- Streets Division
- Traffic Engineering
- Madison Metro
- Treasurer

**External Partners:**

Project for Public Spaces

Various neighborhood associations

**Timeline:**

On-going

**Milestones/Tracking Progress:**

- Number of active NAs
- Level of engagement with city processes (through public comment or other means of communication)
- Successful project and initiative completion by NAs