

BOWLING TOGETHER: The Role of Neighborhood Associations

by Lila Shapero

Neighborhood associations come in all shapes and sizes. Some are formal 501(c)(3) non-profit corporations; others are coffee klatches. Certain housing developments such as condominiums or planned unit developments are required to have homeowner associations. They are found in mobile home parks. Neighborhood associations may form in response to a proposed change to their neighborhood, or they may be multi-issue groups trying to plan for their community's future.

Whatever shape neighborhood associations assume, cities, towns, and counties have been reaching out to them to find ways of working together. As David Kaptain, executive director of Elgin (Illinois) Community Network and an Elgin planning commissioner, puts it, "resident perspective through neighborhood associations is a big advantage of bottom to top planning."

Kaptain's thoughts are echoed by Bob Miller, director of Minneapolis' Neighborhood Revitalization Program, who considers Abraham Lincoln's words apt in describing the participation of neighborhood associations in local planning as "government of the people, by the people, and for the people."

Although neighborhood associations sometimes form in reaction to what residents view as a threat (e.g., crime, traffic, or an unwanted land use), the key is to create a more proactive partnership, one which – over time – can strengthen the community. "Bringing the neighborhood associations into the planning process helps them take

a long view of what their communities need," notes Mike Dove, St. Petersburg, Florida's deputy mayor for neighborhood services.

In the following pages you'll find just some examples of the broad array of neighborhood associations found in cities and towns across the country:

- St. Petersburg, Florida. A Gulf Coast city working to empower its neighborhood associations.
- Elgin, Illinois. An older, Midwestern city working with an umbrella nonprofit agency to draw neighborhood associations into the planning process.
- Suwanee, Georgia. A small, but rapidly growing, community where homeowners associations play an important role.
- Minneapolis, Minnesota. A progressive city providing neighborhood associations with the responsibility for allocating substantial funds for neighborhood-determined improvements.



Members of St. Petersburg's Highland Oaks neighborhood association display their new "monument sign."

We'll focus on the role of neighborhood associations in these places, especially how they relate to the municipal government and the local planning process. As you read about St. Petersburg, Elgin, Suwanee, and Minneapolis, consider how the role of neighborhood associations and related groups in your own city or town compares.

BACK TO NEIGHBORHOODS

For more than a decade, St. Petersburg, Florida has worked to empower its neighborhood associations. According to Mike Dove, a key step was taken in 1993 when the city created the Neighborhood Partnership Department. During the past twelve years, the number of neighborhood associations has grown from 41 to 113, with an additional 13 business associations.

The city suggests, but does not require, by-laws for an association to be recognized. The Neighborhood Partnership Department provides sample by-laws, other resources, and staff support to the neighborhood associations, each of which is registered by the city.



Street bowling was started in the Roser Park neighborhood by Chris Kelly, then president of the neighborhood association. It has caught on throughout St. Petersburg, with neighborhoods now challenging each other!