

City of Austin's Neighborhood Partnering Community Partnership Award Narrative

The mission of the City of Austin's Neighborhood Partnering Program (NPP) is "Empowering Neighborhoods, Building Community." Likened to the local government version of Kickstarter, the program provides a platform for neighborhood groups to develop, resource, and execute small- to medium-sized projects in the City's right-of-way or on City-owned property. Communities cost share their project with any combination of cash contributions, in-kind contributions, or donated labor (sweat-equity). City staff complements this contribution by providing assistance on multiple levels depending on the project: from helping formulate the project scope and cost estimates, to engineering design, to taking items through permitting, and finally even utilizing City crews and contracts for project implementation.

Problem Assessment

The Neighborhood Partnering Program is at the cutting edge of innovation for three main problems:

- 1) *How do you make great places?* The character of a City is often defined by small, everyday places – but often far too many of these places lack the care and personal touch to make them special. From streets that are difficult for pedestrians to navigate, to vacant lots that are difficult to maintain, to ordinary retaining walls that could use an artist's touch – Austin saw such places as potential partnership opportunities.
- 2) *How do you empower neighborhoods and build community?* In *Bowling Alone*, Harvard professor Robert Putnam describes how over the past four decades, significant declines in political, civic, and social participation have caused Americans to be increasingly

disconnected from and less trusting of one another. With its mission of “Empowering Neighborhoods, Building Community” the Neighborhood Partnering Program saw the opportunity to connect citizens to their local neighborhood and civic organizations to build stronger social capital.

- 3) How do you make local government services accessible to everyone? If someone has an innovative idea to improve a piece of City property – where do they go to pitch their idea? How do they get approval? How do they access funding? Who builds the project? One of the main missions of the Neighborhood Partnering Program is to make government accessible by providing a clear straightforward process from concept to implementation.

Program Implementation and Costs

The Neighborhood Partnering Program operates with two full-time City staff (a program manager and a project coordinator), and has recently incorporated two rotating AmeriCorps VISTA members to the team. The total annual operating cost of the Neighborhood Partnering Program is approximately \$770,000 – which includes \$200,000 for staff and \$570,000 for building community-initiated projects. Since 2010, the Neighborhood Partnering Program has allocated over \$1.9 million in City funds to 43 projects. This funding has been leveraged with over \$1 million in community contributions to include over 27,000 volunteer hours.

To make the program accessible to all neighborhood groups regardless of income, the Neighborhood Partnering Program also has established the following community partnerships:

- **AmeriCorps Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA):** The Neighborhood Partnering Program has partnered with AmeriCorps VISTA, a federal national service program designed

to fight poverty on a systemic level. Two Americorps VISTAs are employed full-time to address issues of equity and accessibility for the program. 2015 Americorps VISTA, Matthew Cramer, described his work this way,

"If there is a gap in the existing skill-set in a neighborhood, the Neighborhood Partnering Program team has built a committed network of community partners, nonprofits, educational institutions, and pro bono private sector allies. ... But more importantly, eliminating any technical barrier of entry in the improving civic space has democratized a field often only accessible to industry professionals, foundations, and wealthy donors- an invaluable tool for community wide equity."

- **University of Texas-Austin Longhorn Center for Civic Engagement (LCCE):** Over the past two years, the Neighborhood Partnering Program has partnered with the University of Texas working with over 15 student groups made up of over 75 students. Students in disciplines as diverse as civil engineering, communications, business, liberal arts, and computer science have worked with neighborhood groups to undertake a variety of projects, from brochure and web design for neighborhood websites to outreach to community resource mapping.
- **Engaging Non-Profit Partners:** The Neighborhood Partnering Program found great success in building win-win partnerships with a variety of non-profit organizations. As an example, the Neighborhood Partnering Program has recently formed a relationship with the American Society of Landscape Architects who have offered their services pro bono, especially to low income neighborhoods and neighborhoods needing that expertise



Similarly, NPP has worked closely with the community organizing group Go Austin/Vamos Austin (GAVA) to provide application materials and workshops in English and Spanish, as well as connect Spanish-speaking residents to other City resources.

Measuring Success

In addition to the leveraging of City resources mentioned earlier and before and after pictures of each project site, the Neighborhood Partnering Program recently started an exit survey and interview process for each community group who has successfully completed a project. Below are survey results we've received to date of those who agreed or strongly agreed with the following statements:

The city provided adequate opportunities for us to reach our required cost match	83%
The Neighborhood Partnering Program was effective at troubleshooting problems as they arose	92%
Overall, we were satisfied with the quality of the completed project	100%
The Neighborhood Partnering Program empowers neighborhoods and builds community	92%
The Neighborhood Partnering Program has improved the quality of life in our neighborhood.	100%
We would recommend the Neighborhood Partnering Program to others	100%

Lessons Learned

Between 2010 and 2016, the Neighborhood Partnering Program learned many lessons developing the program. The program was successfully able to work with the legal department to develop a project agreement, liability waivers, and purchase an insurance policy to allow volunteers to do work on City property and on Right-of-Way. With each project, the program



learned what volunteers couldn't do on City property (like use a bobcat to do ground work) and what they could do (like landscaping and mosaic tiling). The program also learned how to best gauge public input and support for neighborhood scale projects – from requiring local neighborhood association support, utilizing door to door petitions, and holding design charrette workshops when there are competing interests and ideas.

Yet our greatest lesson learned is that by making the process of building great public spaces accessible to all our citizens, neighborhoods are empowered and community is built. Through the Neighborhood Partnering Program, the City of Austin has modeled an effective way to engage its citizens to transform underutilized spaces into community-driven, small but meaningful projects – from sidewalks to separated bicycle facilities, trails, community gardens, pocket parks, park improvements, mosaics and street art. Further, the program has built positive relationships as City employees and community members work hand-in-hand problem-solving, overcoming obstacles and celebrating successes together. Meanwhile, neighbors who were not otherwise connected are brought together over a shared vision for a better community. Perhaps Sabrina Joplin, Chair of the Adelphi Acre Community Garden said it best in the midst of building her Neighborhood Partnering Program project,

“This has been such a rewarding process. At our meeting last week Justin made a keen observation that none of the steering members really knew each other before this project began. It had not dawned on me how many friends we've made through this effort. It has truly brought some excitement to our neighborhoods and we look forward to watching this develop out over time.”