myNeighborhood – Building Neighborhood Identity in Kosciusko County

Kosciusko Leadership Academy - 2013

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Executive Summary

Overview

This project was initiated in December 2012 as part of the 2012-13 Kosciusko Leadership Academy (KLA) class. It was designed as a pilot program to assist Warsaw and Winona Lake residents who wanted to (re)establish their neighborhood identities and focus on positive attributes of their neighborhoods. The approach focused on a grass-roots initiative to inspire residents to develop their own sense of place. The goal is to encourage other neighborhoods within the county to develop their own identity.

The City of Warsaw and the Town of Winona Lake have rich histories.

Did you know?

- Winona Lake was once home to the World's Largest Bible Conference.
- Warsaw was voted one of the Best Small Cities to Raise a Family by Forbes Magazine, ranked #11.
- Warsaw is considered the Orthopaedic Capital of the World. Home to three of the top ten manufacturers in the World.
- With four lakes within its city limits, Warsaw is also known as the City of Lakes.
- In the early 1890s, Spring Fountain Park (Winona Lake) had an amusement park including a roller coaster, two cycloramas and even a race track.
- During the days of the Winona Chautauqua, many famous lecturers spoke including William Jennings Bryant; Admiral Byrd and Ronald Amundsen, Arctic Explorers; Will Rogers; and Helen Keller.

myNeighborhood

A KLA Whitepaper about Neighborhood Identity

The myNeighborhood KLA project focused on two established neighborhoods in Warsaw and Winona Lake, their names, physical boundaries, and the characteristics that define them. The goal is to facilitate the neighborhood identity process without unduly influencing the outcome.

There are many potential benefits when the inhabitants of each neighborhood are encouraged to spontaneously identify with their neighborhoods. The benefits include increased pride (individual homes and neighborhood), improved attitude and communication (sense of community and ownership), enhanced safety, and improved health.

Neighborhoods are the building blocks of communities and examples of healthy neighborhoods usually include an identity. When residents can identify with their neighborhood, it seems logical that strong social bonds and enhanced communication will result.

Locally, several issues have been identified which we hope the myNeighborhood program can, in part, help to resolve. These issues include new residents feeling excluded, neighborhoods feeling disconnected and vague, and residents not effectively communicating with each other and with public agencies. We think that Establishing identity can play a strong role in solving these problems, but there are also other benefits to establishing neighborhood identity that go beyond connecting people with their community.

Research

A 2008 Arizona Health Survey found that, "how well people know, trust, and feel connected to their neighbors is related to their overall health and well-being. Thus, efforts to encourage neighbors to get to know and trust one another may ultimately affect the health of individuals as well as communities as a whole."[1] Knowing and trusting your neighbors begins with a sense of identity and association with the neighborhood. This identity builds connectedness and encourages communication.

Other research found that, "Relationships and experiences in the neighborhood influence children's outcomes; specifically, social ties and control among neighbors are related to higher levels of social competence and lower levels of problem behaviors."[2] Neighborhoods with an identity have overall better health, reduced problem behavior in children, and can benefit from many other positive outcomes.

Our feeling is that when people know their neighbors and identify with their neighborhood, they will feel a sense of pride and take responsibility to enhance the look of the neighborhood. As neighborhoods improve and become more desirable, home values can increase. Additionally, residents will feel accountable for others that live in the neighborhood and be more apt to help each other. Increased communication can also encourage participation in the public process to help influence local decision making. Our hope would be a trend toward reduced crime and enhanced participation in community events/activities.

Plan

The principle objective of myNeighborhood is to help to create and establish names and logos to be displayed pennants hung on light poles.

To do that, ee have facilitated several meetings over the past several months within the McKinley Park neighborhood. These, and future, meetings will enable residents to:

- *Learn about the history of the McKinley Park Neighborhood*
- *Identify landmarks and discuss potential neighborhood boundaries and names*
- *Develop a physical identity by creating a unique neighborhood logo*
- *Encourage recognition through the use of pennants hung on light poles*
- *Learn how neighbors can work together to facilitate improvements to roads, signage, ordinances, etc.*
- *Learn how to influence the city budget process*
- *Identify and address issues shared by the other neighborhoods*

- *Unite core groups of neighbors to explore the establishment of neighborhood organizations*
- *Utilize nextdoor.com, a private social network site, to facilitate the communication*

Results

The two pilot neighborhoods, McKinley Park in Warsaw and Southtown in Winona Lake are well on their way to establishing solid identities, communication structures (nextdoor.com), and activities. For example, McKinley Park has already united a core group of 34 neighbors who have scheduled an event to be held this spring. Many residents of Southtown have expressed strong desire to more formally organize neighborhood events such as block parties and neighborhood garage sales.

Through a series of meetings, the focus pilot neighborhood, McKinley Park, has solidified its name, is voting on a pennant design, and is setting its physical boundaries. People within the McKinley Park neighborhood are excited to be reaching out among one another and are also excited to learn more about the historical significance of some of the houses in the neighborhood. We have noticed increasing excitement and desire to be connected with the neighborhood, and we feel that a strong visual identity will only help further the excitement.

Conclusion

Many neighborhoods in Kosciusko County have history, pride, and identity. There are also many neighborhoods that have lost their sense of identity. myNeighborhood's efforts to establish a strong identity for McKinley Park can help to encourage other neighborhoods to do the same. The established benefits of having a strong identity and connection within a neighborhood include increased pride (individual homes and neighborhood), improved attitude and communication (sense of community and ownership), enhanced safety, and improved health.

The investment in neighborhood signage is small, but the impact can be significant. Having a visual reminder of one's neighborhood is an important part of feeling connected. Once the feeling of connection begins, it stands to reason that dialogue would follow. And neighborhoods that communicate can thrive.

Works Cited

1 Highlights from the Arizona Health Survey, 2010. Full report: http://www.arizonahealthsurvey.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/01/AHS-NeighborhoodSocialCohesion.pdf

2 Elliott, D. S., Wilson, W. J., Huizinga, D., Sampson, R. J., Elliott, A., & Rankin, B. (1996). The effects of neighborhood disadvantage on adolescent development. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency, 33*(4), 389-426.