

SOME CITIES (FINALLY) ARE LISTENING UP

Several smart cities are turning to an obvious source—their own neighborhoods and citizens—as partners in solving the tough municipal problems of the 1990s.

Robert Bobb, the city manager of Richmond, Va., recently told *The Public Innovator* that “citizens are literally taking over city halls to get their needs met.” Bobb is a member of the city management profession, which has traditionally thought that it had the best technocratic answers to local problems.

But it was Bobb’s recognition that there’s a limit to how responsive the bureaucrats in city government can be that led to Richmond’s “Neighborhood Team Process.” The city is divided into nine neighborhood-based districts, each with its own team to monitor pressing needs—from crack houses to potholes to tree trimming—and spark action.

Since 1988, more than 500 individuals and organizations in Richmond have participated in the teams, each of which has a broad cross section of citizens, business people, city officials and not-for-profit and civic organizations. The city officials on the teams pledge to take action on most issues within 30 days—before the citizen groups’ next meetings.

In June, the team in Richmond’s Braddock neighborhood capped off four years of working intensively with municipal employees—and cajoling members of the city council—to open a brand new park and fitness trail on what had been four acres of vacant city-owned land.

Jersey City, N.J., under Republican Mayor Bret Schundler, is about to pioneer an approach under which its citizens will be allowed to pick which firms they want to clean streets, repair roads and remove graffiti in their neighborhoods.

The first yearly outdoor maintenance pageant will be held at the Jersey City Armory this autumn. Maintenance, cleanup and repair firms will be given exhibit space to advertise and otherwise strut their stuff. Citizens will be invited to come in and kick tires—mix among the exhibits, talk directly with the competing contractors.

The residents will then get ballots to pick their preferred contractor, keyed to which of Jersey City’s 33 “neighborhood improvement districts” they live in. The winner for each district will get a one-year contract. The company must agree to have a representative attend neighborhood association meetings throughout the year and to maintain a toll-free telephone number for citizen requests and complaints.

To keep the competition lively, no single vendor will get contracts for more than 30 per cent of the neighborhoods in Jersey City. City inspectors will monitor the work of all contractors, and the city will wisely reserve the right to terminate contracts with firms that fail to perform.

In Tampa, Fla., two-term Mayor Sandra Freedman has seen a wave of public support build behind Steve LaBour, her neighborhood ombudsman, whom she charged with making sure that grass-roots concerns reach individual departments and the city council.

Last spring, Tampa held a huge “neighborhood convention” in its handsome downtown convention center. Some 3,000 citizens turned out for the event, which featured booths and exhibits sponsored by city departments and individual neighborhoods.

The scene was government access at its most direct: Police officers, firefighters and the folks from sanitary sewers and water conservation explaining their programs. The neighborhood-based “Paint Your Heart Out, Tampa” program—which aids disabled elderly homeowners—had a booth. And the city attorney and chief labor negotiator sat behind a table hawking mugs and T-shirts advertising Tampa’s “Year of the Neighborhood.”

The idea, according to ombudsman LaBour, was a kind of city “open house” to make it easier for Tampa’s citizens and neighborhood organizations to learn about many of the city government’s departments and to get to know some of the people who run them. Workshops were held to brief neighborhood organizations on various city activities and to get feedback. And members of the neighborhood organizations had their first chance to talk among themselves and mix with city officials in a social setting.

Tampa is one of those fast-growth southern cities that never had the depth and richness of neighborhood organizations characteristic of so many Northeast and Midwest cities. But with plenty of encouragement from city hall, the number of neighborhood organizations in Tampa has grown in just five years from 21 to 54.

At the spring convention, it was clear that the movers and shakers of Tampa’s neighborhood organizations—in both affluent and lower-income areas—felt that their groups had gained status, become more permanent, were getting attention and would remain a force even when their ally, Mayor Freedman, leaves office.

An unresolved issue in cities such as Richmond, Jersey City and Tampa is whether such close, hands-on work with neighborhoods by mayors, city managers and other municipal officials will eventually eclipse the traditional constituent services of city council members—which historically have been a major source of strength for many politicians. The new neighborhood service areas in all three cities ignore, for the most part, the boundaries of city council districts.

So far, though, city councils don’t seem to be complaining about the new generation of direct links between city hall and neighborhoods. And one can argue that council members already have enough on their hands, dealing as they must with budget stringencies, difficult federal and state mandates and their cities’ relationships with the other communities in their metropolitan regions.

What is clear is that mayors and professional managers are getting the point that an increasingly restive and demanding populace has to be reached and worked with where it lives—in the neighborhoods. ■

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