

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

NEIGHBORHOOD ACTION INITIATIVE:

ENGAGING CITIZENS IN REAL CHANGE

By William R. Potapchuk

The Neighborhood Action Initiative has perhaps engaged more citizens at one time than any other collaborative initiative. In part, use of new technologies for instant feedback made this possible. The process was sparked by the city's new mayor as a means both of engaging citizens and reinventing government agencies. Results of the process included a new, ambitious structure for keeping citizens and government agencies focused on the needs of the neighborhoods.

Powerful images of Washington DC populate our collective memory. The White House and the United States Capitol are not only well-known buildings; they are icons for the principles of our country. History book events happen in Washington DC. Whether it is Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. telling us "I Have a dream" or John F. Kennedy minding us to "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country," images of Washington come to mind.

While Washingtonians share these images, their daily lives and experiences away from the Federal City provide other, contrasting images. A Washingtonian recalling powerful images of notable streets might visualize Fourteenth Street after the riots along with the extraordinary Embassy Row on Massachusetts Avenue. Recalled images of neighborhoods might focus on Deanwood and Anacostia with their all-too-many abandoned houses and Georgetown and Chevy Chase with their million dollar homes.

Contrasts also surround local notions of democracy. Washington D.C. is simultaneously capital of the free world and the only place in the United States that does not have a voting representative in Congress. Federal intervention in the affairs of the District of Columbia is a prominent part of the political landscape. Members of Congress oversee the budget, review locally enacted laws, and, on occasion, insert unwanted restrictions on policy and budget.

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Limited home rule has existed only since 1974 when residents first elected a mayor to provide executive and administrative leadership for the city. A large majority of residents believe that they have been denied full citizenship and continue efforts to make DC the 51st state. This tension between home rule and Federal intervention came to a boil in 1995 when Congress, driven by a sense that District government was out of control and quickly going broke, appointed a five-member Control Board with the powers to oversee the District's budget, veto legislation, and appoint senior officials. Longtime Mayor Marion Barry's erratic leadership and questionable personal behavior exacerbated Congressional concerns about the district. Even though many African Americans viewed Barry as a local hero, Congress did not hesitate to act.

The Control Board wasted little time in appointing well-respected public administrator Anthony Williams as Chief Financial Officer (CFO). Williams, the former CFO at the US Department of Agriculture, could not have been more different from Barry. The bow-tied, conservatively dressed Williams seemed more comfortable with numbers than politics while the dashiki gowned Barry was the man of the people.

While other appointments made by the Control Board were disappointing, Williams rose to the occasion, leading the District to its first balanced budget in years. By improving tax collection and gaining control of dysfunctional finance offices, Williams was able to challenge Barry and win. Admiration for Williams grew while Barry's star waned.

Against this backdrop, longtime community leaders -- both black and white -- saw an opportunity to quite literally change the face of the Mayor's office and began a campaign to recruit Anthony Williams to run for Mayor. Williams resisted at first, but slowly came around to the idea and started a low-key campaign. He started by listening, attending gatherings over coffee in every corner of the District to hear what residents had to say.

On January 4, 1999, Williams was sworn in as the fourth mayor of the District of Columbia. He came to office with several clear perceptions. Citizens echoed his sense that the City's systems were profoundly broken. More disturbing to him was the profound distrust citizens had for District government. Many had lost faith in the possibility of fixing the government.

A larger need was also clear to Williams. The District must once again assert its ability to be a self-governing jurisdiction in order to remove the shackles of the Control Board. This meant maintaining a balanced budget as the statute defined while rebuilding Congressional faith in District government to manage its own affairs. The District of Columbia needed to focus on the basics -- collecting garbage, removing snow, and eradicating day-long waits at the Department of Motor Vehicles, among others -- while enhancing the government's capacity to tackle larger tasks such as revitalizing neighborhoods, reforming dysfunctional regulatory structures and rebuilding public infrastructures. To be successful, city government needed to engage citizens to establish direction and set priorities and then work with them to achieve the goals.

One of the formidable challenges facing mayors and other chief elected officials is balancing planning, citizen engagement and action. Without enough planning, actions often fail to achieve intended results. Without appropriate and meaningful citizen engagement, citizens continue to distrust government

and oppose plans in which they had no part. On the other hand, too much planning and not enough action usually means elected officials are looking for work after the next election.

When Mayor Williams was elected, he announced a 60-day plan of quick interventions designed to address longstanding citizen gripes. The initial set of 33 promises ranged from opening a long-closed section of Massachusetts Avenue to holding a rat summit to address the surge in the rat population due to poor garbage collection. While committing to take action on these longstanding complaints, the new Mayor knew that his government would have to undergo fundamental change before it could address residents' needs in a comprehensive and sustainable manner. He also knew that he would have to rekindle citizens' belief in government in order to achieve his goals.

In his Inaugural address Mayor Williams committed to transforming the way the District government works and proposed a major new initiative creating a planning and budgeting process that would engage citizens directly in the governance of their city, enable them to hold public officials accountable for improving services and involve them in improving their own neighborhoods. These ambitious goals required a partnership.

TRANSFORMING THE DISTRICT'S GOVERNANCE

To assist him in making his vision a reality, Mayor Williams partnered with AmericaSpeaks, a national non-profit organization dedicated to developing innovative methods for large groups of diverse citizens to play an authentic and meaningful role in public life. AmericaSpeaks' founder, Dr. Carolyn J. Lukensmeyer, brought an extensive background in large-scale systems change along with a passion for empowering citizens and healing the nation's democracy. Lukensmeyer and AmericaSpeaks had recently completed a two-year project, funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts, to engage citizens in a national nonpartisan deliberation on the future of Social Security. The project, called Americans Discuss Social Security, served as a groundbreaking laboratory for integrating face-to-face dialogue with technology that enables thousands of citizens to join the debate on a critical public policy issue. Three live two-way video teleconferences across 10 cities each with three hours of dialogue with citizens and elected officials, including the President, capped this innovative effort.

Mayor Williams challenged AmericaSpeaks to adapt its methods to local government to help create a new cycle of governance integrating cross agency citywide strategic planning with broad based citizen engagement. Williams knew that if he was to successfully transform District government, citizens had to feel ownership of critical decisions and be willing to work as partners with the government in bringing about the needed changes. The partnership with AmericaSpeaks provided the means for achieving these ends. The Mayor called the new effort the Neighborhood Action Initiative and committed himself and his administration to its bold slogan: "Come Together, Work Together, Succeed Together."

CITYWIDE STRATEGIC PLANNING AND MEANINGFUL CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

Neighborhood Action's deep commitment to bringing together citizens to help set the District's priorities and strategic direction required new approaches. In most large jurisdictions, citywide citizen engagement is perfunctory at best. Numerous practical challenges for dealing with large numbers of people limit possible approaches. Smaller events held in various parts of the city raise concerns that

citizens from different backgrounds do not meet. Activist groups often coopt these kinds of events for their own purposes. Large citywide events often operate "by invitation only" as a means for limiting numbers. Those excluded often oppose proposed actions. Despite a sincere commitment to meaningful citizen engagement, the practicality of engaging large numbers of citizens too often precludes real engagement.

Neighborhood Action broke through these traditional challenges to meaningful citizen engagement with a Citizen Summit, a large-scale, technology-enabled deliberative conversation about future priorities and strategies for the District. Using a process designed by AmericaSpeaks and its model for citizen engagement, thousands of citizens from every walk of life and every neighborhood in the City shared their values and vision and expressed their collective desires for the future of the City.

Once the decision was made to hold the Summit, it took six months to make the event happen -- six months to tackle countless logistical, financial, and political challenges. District staff and AmericaSpeaks shared the leadership and management tasks for this effort. Managing the event like a large military operation, the organizers used frequent strategy sessions; a changing mix of staff, consultants and volunteers; and a zeal for success to tackle the challenges. They raised funds from local companies and foundations. They consulted numerous community leaders either individually or through an Advisory Board and conducted aggressive outreach efforts through churches, neighborhood associations, and community based organizations. They identified the Convention Center as the site for the Summit. They hired technology partners and recruited and trained facilitators from the District and elsewhere. They prepared a 40-page detailed agenda and engaged volunteers to make phone calls, stuff envelopes and prepare packets.

The idea of strategic planning was as new to the District as the Summit was innovative. Over time the District had developed a multiplicity of agencies each with a separate plan along with numerous other plans for specific areas or issues. These narrow and more focused plans provided a foundation for the strategic plan. Neighborhood Action would not be seen as "reinventing the wheel." A loaned executive from the World Bank reviewed and summarized each of the previous plans. This review combined with a distillation of citizen concerns and requests that were received by the new administration provided the background material for a Mayor's cabinet retreat launching the Citywide Strategic Planning Process. At the retreat, cross-agency teams were created to develop draft strategic plans for six priority areas: Building and Sustaining Healthy Neighborhoods, Investing in Children and Youth, Strengthening Families, Making Government Work, Economic Development, and Unity of Purpose. Over the course of several months, the cross-agency teams worked with community stakeholders to develop the draft plans. The organizers summarized these drafts into a 4-page citizen-friendly newspaper for use at the Summit.

CITIZEN SUMMIT I

On the morning of November 20, 1999, organizers waited with bated breath. Would enough residents participate to make the event truly significant? As the morning progressed, a trickle of citizens turned into a stream of citizens from every part of the city. Over 3,000 citizens came, demographically reflecting the composition of the city.

The use of small groups and technology helped the organizers manage a public conversation of unprecedented scale. Citizens sat randomly at 10-12 person round banquet tables in the largest room at

the DC Convention Center. Each table had a trained facilitator, many with long years of experience and well-honed skills (all 300 had received three hours of training on the specifics of this event). The facilitators helped make participants comfortable and introduced new arrivals to their tablemates. Each table was equipped with a laptop computer as part of a room-wide wireless network. Each participant had a wireless polling keypad. Looking something like a television remote, these keypads allowed instant voting -- much like the "audience lifeline" on the television show, "Who Wants to be a Millionaire?"

This combination of technology and process expertise was important. Lead facilitator, Carolyn Lukensmeyer, framed and defined tasks from the main stage. Following the opening, the facilitators guided a table conversation. One person at the table was responsible for gathering what citizens had said and typing it into the computer. This data was instantly transmitted to a "theme team" responsible for identifying common threads and themes. The emerging themes could then be used to frame questions for the audience to respond to using their polling keypads. The keypads allowed the Mayor and the Summit's facilitator to poll citizens throughout the program on questions ranging from demographics to policy priorities to their satisfaction with the event. The results of each poll appeared instantly on large screens at the front of the room. Further, Mayor Williams could respond to the themes and preferences voiced by citizens in real time, letting citizens know their voices were being heard.

Citizens spoke clearly. They showed overwhelming support for the themes of Investing in Children and Youth and Strengthening Families and urged that they be combined into a comprehensive strategy while expressing their pain and anger at the abysmal performance of the schools. At the conclusion of the Summit, using their polling keypads, 94% of the Summit participants said they had the opportunity to "fully participate," 91% of the participants rated the Summit as "excellent" or "good," 96% said the technology added value to the forum, and 99% said Neighborhood Action was an important program.

PROCESSING SUMMIT RESULTS; FINALIZING THE STRATEGIC PLAN

The organizers collected over 300 pages of ideas, concerns, and affirmations from citizens at the Summit. A Neighborhood Action web page, a discussion guide that was published in the Washington Post and Washington Times with a feedback form, and phone lines available to citizens watching the Summit live on cable television provided additional information. A team of 15 staff people analyzed and organized this input into common themes and presented a report of citizen priorities to the Mayor's agency directors and sent copies to every participant from the Summit. At a Cabinet retreat in December, senior officials used citizen priorities articulated at the Summit to modify the Citywide Strategic Plan.

A Neighborhood Action Forum on January 29th brought citizens back together to assess the changes to the strategic plan and to have focused discussions about issues in their neighborhood. Despite being rescheduled from January 27th because of snow, more than 1,500 citizens came to the gymnasium on a Saturday morning at the University of the District of Columbia to join the conversation. Participants received the revised strategic plan as well as a document describing how the plan connected to citizen priorities. Once again, citizens participated in facilitated, round-table discussions with wireless polling keypads.

Using input from the January 29th forum, the Mayor and his agency directors finalized the citywide Strategic Plan in February. Aspirations and actions in the Plan framed changes to the Mayor's FY2001 budget. They earmarked over \$700 million to match program priorities to citizen priorities in the Mayor's

budget request to City Council. Following budget approval by the Council, staff summarized the Strategic Plan into 28-page citizen friendly report showing how it responded to citizens' desires.

IMPLEMENTATION AND ACTION

Citizens, for the most part, wanted profound and deep change -- a transformation of dysfunctional systems that were no longer productive. Schools, human services, and regulatory functions were the main targets. Citizens also wanted improvements in their immediate environment -- their neighborhoods.

The District adopted a multi-faceted implementation plan. Early activities focused on the schools. The importance of schools in the minds of citizens defined a significant portion of the Mayor's agenda and emboldened him to tackle governance in the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS).

Though DCPS was separately governed, it also was subject to Control Board intervention. The Control Board sharply restrained the School Board's powers, naming advisors to a school committee to provide policy guidance and appointing senior administrators for the system. The Mayor decided to tackle the issue of school governance by proposing an appointed board -- a path taken by other big-city mayors. The proposal was met with substantial resistance because it limited local democracy. The Mayor argued that well-qualified citizens tended not to run for school board. He actively and visibly negotiated with the City Council, the School Board, the Control Board, and the community on his proposal ultimately reaching a political compromise. A half-elected, half-appointed school board would now have full control over the schools.

BUILDING THE NEIGHBORHOOD ACTION TRIANGLE

The implementation of the strategic plan included a series of robust initiatives along with programs and actions linked together to work toward its goals. Two new initiatives -- the Neighborhood Planning Initiative and the Neighborhood Services Initiative -- joined with the Office of Neighborhood Action to create what is informally called the Neighborhood Action triangle. The Neighborhood Planning Initiative engages citizens in every neighborhood in the District to develop short and medium-term action plans for improvements to their neighborhoods. The Neighborhood Services Initiative, using multi-agency teams of employees works with citizens to tackle persistent problem area.

THE NEIGHBORHOOD SERVICES INITIATIVE

The Neighborhood Services Initiative (NSI) assumes that ward-based, cross-agency teams working together with the community will be far more effective in resolving issues through joint understanding and trust-building than through traditional service delivery systems with little or no engagement with the neighborhood. In other words, a staff team drawn from different agencies working in partnership with neighbors to solve problems will be more effective than a single staff person working alone. Working collaboratively with neighborhood residents would require organizational and systems.

Simple in its principles but radical in its significance and ambitious intent, the NSI changes how the city does its business. Its approach is in stark contrast to the autonomy and independence enjoyed by agencies in prior years. NSI requires partnerships and places employee accountability at the Ward level. The initiative has a profound impact on the way work is done inside the DC government as agencies work

to ensure that citizens receive the services they need. NSI intentionally embeds a new approach within the organizational culture that also can be used to tackle other complex problems.

The cross-agency Neighborhood Services teams primarily focus on persistently problematic areas registering high levels of community concern and interest such as drug activity occurring in abandoned buildings or the spillover effects of poor apartment building maintenance in a neighborhood. These chronic problems absorb a disproportionate level of effort and resources amid few signs of progress. NS teams zero in on these problems, developing and implementing work plans in partnership with residents to help reclaim and stabilize their neighborhoods.

HANDLING THE TOUGH PROBLEMS AND THE EVERYDAY PROBLEMS

One of the continuing challenges for government is balancing the tension between a desire to engage citizens in responding to specific challenges against the desire of citizens to just find someone who can fix their problems. To combat this challenge, the NSI partners with the Customer Service Initiative (CSI) featuring a call center with a central number for all citizen requests. Each caller receives a tracking number for his or her complaint. The Call Center notifies the agency responsible for action and tracks the resulting actions. While this effort may seem modest, at the time when Mayor Williams took office only one of every 20 staff members had a desktop computer and some staff were still using rotary telephones. The Call Center focused on common citizen-generated single agency requests. A single request might identify the need to pick up a large item of trash or for trimming a tree or inspecting a problem property. Some requests appeared to be directed toward a single agency yet required a multiple agency response. For example, in some neighborhoods, abandoned cars are used by drug dealers to stash their drugs so they cannot be arrested for possession. If the Department of Public Works tows the car, dealers will quickly move another in to take its place. Only a coordinated response between the police department and public works will fix the problem.

A review of the numbers of citizens requests and the District's responses illustrates the challenge. In 1999, the Mayor's Office received nearly 440 requests for agency services each day (13,200 a month), the majority of which (61% to 75%) were misdirected or unfulfilled. Many requests remained outstanding for more than 90 days as unaccountable agency contacts and unreliable or non-existent systems precluded follow-up. Few constituents were contacted during these 90 days whether action was taken or not. Not surprisingly, approximately 25-50 percent of requests were "resubmitted" by dissatisfied constituents. Citizens, on a good day, experienced the DC government as unresponsive, ineffective and uncoordinated; on other days as extremely frustrating. If effective collaboration with citizens were to occur, District government needed to become a reliable partner. The NSI and CSI formed the primary strategy for rebuilding citizens' trust in the ability of DC government to deliver services.

DEVELOPING CORE TEAMS

In order to engage citizens where they live, District government staff had to meet them as real and worthy partners. District employees would have to become knowledgeable about the neighborhood and its service needs. Familiar faces needed to be able to deliver on commitments to make meaningful and tangible change in their neighborhoods.

Each of the eight wards now has a "core team" made up of 7-12 front line workers and program managers from agencies with the most needed services for that particular ward. A Neighborhood Services

Coordinator guides and manages their work. The Coordinators facilitate problem solving by the group, work with other core team members to engage residents and monitor progress on problem areas across his or her ward.

Initially, the NSI teams focused on connecting agencies dealing with various aspects of public safety, public health, and cleanliness to provide readily visible differences in the neighborhood environment as a means of rebuilding trust in government. Goals related to economic and health issues will be added as the effort matures.

A WEEK IN THE LIFE NEIGHBORHOOD SERVICES IN WARD 1

On Monday, two police Sergeants, a housing inspector and a Fire Marshall gather together to decide what to do in front of an illegal rooming house with a variety of housing code violations, a gambling parlor, brothel and drug distribution center in the basement, a non-working fire detection system, defective smoke detectors and only one 'point of egress' for the entire building. As they check with each other and seek advice from their superiors, a Neighborhood Service Coordinator (NSC) locates a city lawyer and briefs the City Administrator's office as to what is going on at 1512 Park Rd. Decisions are made on the spot and the neighbors congratulate the team at their next community meeting.

That Thursday night at 7:30 the Ward 1 NSC is explaining to the Quebec St. neighbors all the steps that were taken to abate the problems on Hobart Place. As he finishes, the Police Sergeant chimes in, describing the work of the Police Department. The inspector from public works adds what she can do about the trash problems and the Ward Planner explains what will happen once new development comes to that area. The successful transformation of the Hobart Place neighborhood creates enthusiasm and disbelief among the Quebec Street neighbors. The residents resolve to organize and end the meeting with renewed hope and optimism. The NSC promises he'll be back.

On a wintry Saturday morning, a 7-year-old boy finishes a street football game on Hobart Place as curious neighbors wonder why there are police officers, fire fighters and Recreation workers right on the street where there used to be drug dealers. The 7-year-old finishes the game and tells the Neighborhood Service Coordinator he's ready to help clean up the empty lot. The neighbors, many of whom have never met, bring out refreshments, donuts and hot chocolate while approximately 20 adolescents from 7 to 17 years of age sweep, shovel and pick up a dozen bags of trash. A crew from public works chips in with a pick right there, right then.

This is a brief snapshot of the weekly schedule of a Neighborhood Service Coordinator and his team. The Ward based, cross-functional, inter-agency, holistic approach to problem solving is slowly, but surely turning around people's perspectives, changing the negative paradigms and allowing citizens and front line workers to see, hear and participate with each other in cooperative and refreshingly unorthodox ways. The new city at work.

Jose Sueiro
Ward 1 Neighborhood Service Coordinator

Each team tackles a workload of persistent problem areas throughout their ward. As staff are out on the street, they learn about other issues and attend to these as well (see vignette). These services help stabilize a neighborhood but are not sufficient to revitalize it. This is the task of the Neighborhood Planning Initiative.

THE NEIGHBORHOOD PLANNING INITIATIVE

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, neighborhood planning in the District of Columbia served as a national model for other cities. Over 300 locally elected neighborhood representatives -- Advisory Neighborhood Commissioners -- helped neighborhood planners develop Ward plans -- comprehensive documents informed by enormous data gathering efforts and defined through a consultative process with citizens. By the time Mayor Williams took office, the Office of Planning, which once employed almost 100 staff members, housed only 11 professional planners. Ward planning and neighborhood planning had become spotty and perfunctory. The District's neighborhoods paid dearly for the lack of thoughtful, strategic attention.

The Neighborhood Planning Initiative emerged from citizens at the Summit and from the administration. Building upon earlier successes at neighborhood planning in the District, it addresses three common shortcomings of neighborhood planning efforts both within the District and in cities around the country:

- Different neighborhood planning efforts within the same neighborhood are often not coordinated with each other.
- Neighborhood plans are often not fully implemented.
- Neighborhood plans are often not connected to citywide strategic plans and budgets.

The design of the neighborhood planning process addresses the first shortcoming. The linkages expressed within the Neighborhood Action triangle largely address the next two. The linkage with Neighborhood Action provides a vehicle for carrying neighborhood issues and priorities forward to the citywide strategic plan and budget. The linkage with Neighborhood Services relates service interventions to longer term planning goals. With these linkages, the Neighborhood Planning Initiative becomes a powerful tool for building and maintaining healthy, safe, and vital neighborhoods.

THE SCOPE OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD PLANNING INITIATIVE

Many cities that have initiated neighborhood planning programs do so by concentrating their efforts in specific neighborhoods and then expanding to reach most or all of the other neighborhoods. In DC, the decision was made to work in all neighborhoods concurrently for two reasons. First, previous targeting

decisions in the District had been made largely on political grounds creating widespread distrust of the District's ability to select wisely. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, if neighborhood plans were to become a major vehicle for driving the future budgets and citywide strategic plans it would be unfair to be planning in some neighborhoods and not in others.

However, it was important to limit the reach in other ways. There are at least 120 named neighborhoods in DC. Creating a plan for each of them would be impossible. At the January Neighborhood Action Forum, planners floated a map grouping every neighborhood into one of 39 neighborhood clusters. Citizens were asked to identify boundary issues at the Forum and planners then convened follow-up meetings to address them.

The Neighborhood Planning Initiative hired eight neighborhood planners -- one for each ward -- to staff the effort. Planners became partners with their respective Neighborhood Service Coordinators on a variety of tasks. Operating on a very ambitious timeframe, the planners had to complete the neighborhood plans prior to the next Citizen Summit in order to identify neighborhood issues to bring to the Summit.

STRATEGIC NEIGHBORHOOD ACTION PLANS

Each neighborhood cluster completes a Strategic Neighborhood Action Plan, or SNAP. SNAPs include:

- A profile of the neighborhood cluster;
- A citizen-developed vision for the neighborhood cluster which includes the essential ingredients for a livable community; and
- Action plans for priority essential ingredients. Action plans include strategies for near and medium term improvements as well requests to be fed into the District's strategic planning and budgeting process.

Several structured workshops and a series of consultations with steering groups -- some informal, some formal -- in each cluster helped planners develop SNAPs. Through the SNAP development process, action plans begin to detail requests for specific agencies. Each agency must then review and respond to all of the requests. Agencies act on these requests when possible and provide a clear rationale when action is not possible. Certain requests require additional problem solving by agency staff, neighborhood planners and the community. The SNAPs are finalized in a validation workshop with the community.

BRINGING NEW VOICES TO THE TABLE

The first Citizen Summit largely reflected the makeup of the District in terms of representation by ward, by race and ethnicity and by income level with one significant exception -- youth. Significant parts of the Strategic Plan spoke to issues affecting youth, but few younger people were in the audience to share their perspective. Based upon that recognition, the Mayor committed to convening a summit for youth.

Youth do not do well in the District of Columbia. For example, in DC, 16 percent of youth between 16 and 19 years old are not in school and not working compared to a national average of 8 percent and that of the worst state, New Mexico, 13 percent. The rate of teen deaths by accident, homicide, and suicide is 159 per 100,000 teens ages 15-19 in the District. The national average is 54 deaths per 100,000 teens with Nevada the worst state at 86 deaths per 100,000 teens (Kids Count, 1998). Other indicators confirm that youth do not do well in the District.

When approached about the possibility of a Summit, young people were skeptical. Many felt that they had been used in the past by politicians to score political points without any commitment to change in return. They demanded a full youth-adult partnership through every phase of planning for the Summit.

The administration worked with a design team dominated by young people. Focus groups with over 400 youth participating helped the design team identify the issues to be discussed at the Youth Summit. Young people identified three principles that should guide planning for the Summit:

- Genuine youth empowerment;
- Youth/Adult partnership in all phases, including the leadership of activities at the Summit; and
- Commitment to real and tangible follow through to ensure that systemic change would occur.

They also insisted that they be able to walk away from the day having learned a skill or talked about something critical in their personal lives as well as helping shape the city's policies and program for youths.

The event, The City is Mine: Youth Summit 2000, took place on November 20. 1,400 young people between the ages of 14-21 had the opportunity to tell the community the problems they face while growing up in this city and what needed to be done to address these issues. They worked specifically on three major issues: safety and violence, education, and jobs/training. They also participated in workshops such as Joining Forces: Youth/Police Relations, Bling, Bling: Real Life Success Stories, and Uncensored: The Real Deal about Sex, STDs, and Pregnancy.

In order to realize the promise of the Summit, follow-up was critical. In December, 125 Summit participants met with Mayor Williams and other city, community, business and faith leaders to review the outcomes of the Summit, suggest additional actions and prioritize the recommendations. In February, 225 young people and adults gathered to hear the government's plans for responding to youth suggestions. Small group discussions provided input into the design of youth governance mechanisms and suggested ways to improve working relationships among organizations serving young people.

As a result of the Summit, the City Council created a permanent Youth Advisory Council. A number of young people visited Hampton, Virginia and Portland, Oregon to learn about their models then formulated their own approach and lobbied the Council to adopt it. The Youth Advisory Council gives youth in the District of Columbia an ongoing voice in budget and policy. In addition, the District realigned its budget to respond to youth priorities and community based organizations began to realign

their work as well. Many of the youth who were trained to be facilitators at the Youth Summit went on to serve as facilitators for Citizen Summit II.

WORKING THROUGH A STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT CYCLE

Neighborhood Action's efforts to transform the District's governance are rooted in a strategic management cycle that holds government accountable for implementing the community's shared goals and priorities. The two year cycle brings together citizen-driven planning -- Summits and Neighborhood Planning -- with implementation and performance measurement tools. Each cycle informs the subsequent one making it more comprehensive. Key elements of the Strategic Management Cycle include:

- **CITIZEN SUMMIT.** The Summit and the follow-up Forum drives the elements and priorities of the Strategic Plan. Summits are the capstone of the cycle, integrating past achievements with current aspirations and providing the core mechanism for citizens to drive the strategic plan.
- **STRATEGIC PLAN.** The Plan includes a vision, key themes, objectives, and action items for every objective.
- **PERFORMANCE CONTRACTS.** Based upon the objectives in the Strategic Plan, the Mayor establishes a performance contract with every deputy mayor and department head. The department heads extend these performance contracts to every member of management.
- **SCORECARDS.** While performance contracts are increasingly common in government, few citizens know the content of these contracts. DC lifted the key elements out of each department head and deputy mayor's contract and printed scorecards. Each scorecard has a picture of the person and a checklist for their major performance goals for the year. The scorecards help keep the government accountable to citizens.

The first iteration of the cycle addressed each of these elements. As the cycle progresses, new elements emerge that inform the second iteration of the cycle.

- **NEIGHBORHOOD PLANS.** Drafts SNAPs propose a series of action steps either for immediate action or to be included in the citywide strategic planning and budgeting process.
- **NEIGHBORHOOD SERVICE RESOURCE NEEDS.** Neighborhood Service work plans identify needs for which there are not sufficient resources. These needs are fed forward to the strategic plan.
- **STRATEGIC PLAN AND PERFORMANCE CONTRACT ASSESSMENTS.** The completion of the first round of the cycle also yields data on how well the District performed in meeting objectives in the Strategic Plan.

**HOLDING THE SECOND SUMMIT
AND MOVING INTO HIGH GEAR**

Planning for Citizen Summit II, provided an opportunity to learn from the first Summit and to fully implement the citywide strategic planning process in the District. One of the shortcomings of the first Summit was the lack of city employee involvement. Employees complained that they knew the District well and that since they would be charged with implementation, they should have a voice in the development of the plan. This time, five employee mini-summits were held, one for each theme in the plan. In addition, a special session brought in labor leaders who had been left out of major decisions. As a result of their participation, they were better positioned to become partners in the implementation of the plan.

In addition to preparing the draft plan, planners worked hard to finalize and summarize the draft SNAPs for presentation at the Summit. Designers struggled to find a balance between providing a performance report -- which might be viewed primarily as public relations for the Mayor -- and finding ways for citizens to learn what was working and what needed improvement.

The world-shaking events of September 11th changed all the calculations. Three students from DC Public Schools, winners of a contest sponsored by National Geographic, were killed with their teachers when their plane crashed into the Pentagon. As October 6th, the day of the Summit approached, Reagan National Airport remained closed. Tourism had almost disappeared and by some reports as many as 20,000 service workers had been laid off. Anti-climatically, the Control Board shut its doors on September 30th.

The agenda of the Summit reflected the new times. The mood of the day was more subdued. An interfaith ceremony conducted by leaders of seven different faith traditions helped participants mourn those who died and to acknowledge their common humanity. While many were moved to tears, there also was a desire to get on with the business of the Summit.

Indeed, while many at the first Summit were intrigued by the technology, at the second Summit, the technology just became part of the program as citizens came prepared to work. The rest of the day focused on two tasks. First, participants examined the draft 2002-2004 Strategic Plan which reflected input from the first strategic plan and the SNAPs. Participants discussed how to improve the plan, using the same format as at the first Summit. Then participants joined others from their neighborhood clusters. While in their cluster groupings, citizens reviewed priorities from their SNAP plans and discussed implementation ideas.

At the end of the Summit, participants were of two minds. In part, they expressed frustration that there was not enough time to work on the plan because of the introductory interfaith ceremony. They also affirmed the need to recommit to the democratic process and strengthen civil society in the aftermath of the September 11th events.

Following the Summit, staff again worked to digest the enormous amount of data generated. In addition, a further intensive effort combined the draft strategic plan, the data from the Summit, the draft SNAPs and priorities from Neighborhood Services into priorities for every neighborhood cluster in the

District. These priorities will be presented back to citizens in the form a revised Strategic Plan on December 1st at the follow-up Neighborhood Action Forum. Strategic priorities will then be reflected in the administration's budget request to the City Council in March.

THE PATH FORWARD

Neighborhood Action comprises a powerful set of ideas and actions focused on two critical objectives -- deeply engaging citizens in the governance of their city and building a high-performance local government organization that responds to citizen needs and delivers on its promises. Both aspects are essential in order to rebuild trust between citizens and government.

Neither would have been possible without the leadership and the commitment of the Mayor. His role in articulating the felt need and core values was essential for moving forward. The effort, though, would not have moved far without the framework, process expertise, and technology provided by AmericaSpeaks and the desire and endless energy of a set of core staff members.

This partnership allowed the District of Columbia to engage citizens in the development of a strategic plan perhaps more deeply and effectively than any other jurisdiction in the country. Numerous other forums offer citizens opportunities to participate in governance. For citizens who want to work in their own neighborhood, they can join hands and tackle problems with the Neighborhood Service Initiative or they can engage in the Neighborhood Planning Initiative, developing and driving the strategic agenda for their neighborhood. Every two years, citizens can participate in the Citizen Summit, setting the overall direction for their community.

The District still has a long way to go. Those distressed neighborhoods; the disturbing statistics on youth; and dysfunctional regulatory systems will not be changed in year or two. But the District has put in place an effective model for collaborative change that puts it on the path toward true self-governance and transformative long-term results.