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Napa Valley Life
April - May 2009

Sustainably Speaking

“Neighborhoods – There's So Much More”

by Mick Winter

“Neighborhood” means far more than people living near one another. A true neighborhood has a community spirit, and its physical design encourages frequent interaction between people. Unfortunately, many neighborhoods—particularly suburban tracts—do not provide this encouragement.

Lack of contact among neighbors means that residents are missing valuable benefits that their neighbors can provide:

- Friendship and social interaction
- Security – looking out after one another and our homes
- Child protection – keeping an eye on playing children.
- Intergenerational interaction – where youths can enjoy, and learn from, older adults, and where seniors can enjoy the play and enthusiasm of youth.
- Sharing knowledge and skills, such as home repair, cooking, canning, gardening and auto repair.
- Sharing common tools and equipment, such as specialized home and auto repair cooking, and gardening.
- Discussing, and creating solutions to, common issues and problems.
- A neighborhood association that can lobby local government to meet the needs of the neighborhood.
- Cooperation and sharing to help everyone reduce use of resources and energy.

Your neighborhood has the potential to be much more supportive of community, sustainability, and money and energy saving. But first you have to organize it.

The First Meeting

Begin to organize your neighborhood by talking to neighbors who you already know, and introducing yourself to others. Then hold a meeting at your home, or at a local school, business, place of worship, or other convenient location.

Make it comfortable and informal, with snacks and light beverages. Schedule regular meetings thereafter. Make at least every second or third meeting a social event as well as a planning one, so that meetings are an enjoyable opportunity to get to know each other. Be sure to include teenagers and older children who wish to get involved.

At the Meeting

Topics that could be discussed at your first or future meetings.

- “Hot” issues - Any current issues, such as public safety, traffic, or proposed developments.
- Resident List - Make and distribute a list of everyone's name, address, phone number, and email address.
- Phone Tree - Set up a "phone tree" (a list of designated phone numbers for people to call) to notify neighbors about meetings, events and other timely information. The “phone” tree can also use email.
- Special Needs - Identify the elderly, disabled, and others in your neighborhood who need special care and attention.
- Skills Inventory – Create a skills inventory for members of your neighborhood (medical, first aid, alternative healing, ham radio, teaching, carpentry, electrical, sewing, plumbing, music, firearms, mechanic, welding, computer, gardening, cooking, canning, childcare, etc.). This will result from occupations, hobbies, interests and other sources. People may be surprised just how many skills they have as a group once they go through this process.
- Resource Inventory - Create an inventory of "things" owned by people in the neighborhood that they are willing to share. This includes tools, equipment, home items and anything else's that's tangible, useful and lendable. Most of these are not items you need every day, but rather only for special occasions. Not every household needs to have a complete set of all this stuff.
- Newsletter - Start a neighborhood newsletter. You can print out copies and deliver them door-to-door, post them in central places where everyone can see them, or produce them as an email letter. Include online distribution as well, but don't make that the sole way to distribute the newsletter; not everyone has access to the Internet.
- Interest Groups - Create weekly discussion meetings or book clubs.
- Food - Establish a neighborhood garden, a food co-op, or a relationship with a local farm.
- Preservation – See if there is a need to preserve historical buildings or trees or other green areas.
- Carpool - See if neighbors can share trips to work or school.
- Share Errands - Check with neighbors to see if you can carpool on errand trips around town or to a neighboring city. It's possible also to do errands for neighbors and have them return the favor for you at another time. You'll all save on time and gasoline money.
- Bulk Shopping/Discounts - Keep in mind that since you now have an entire neighborhood organized, your purchasing leverage has increased. You should be able to negotiate group discounts and bulk purchases with local businesses.
- Walkability – Is your neighborhood a safe and enjoyable place to walk? Enjoyable walking means more exercise and better health. There are actions you can take to make your neighborhood more walkable.

Community/Neighborhood Gardens

One of the ways to foster community cohesion—and save money—is by developing a community garden. Gardeners share land, tools, knowledge and labor to produce food for themselves and others. There are an estimated 18,000 community gardens throughout Canada and the United States. In addition to providing food for the gardeners who tend it—and some produce is often donated to local food banks—the gardens bring together people of all ages, economic level and ethnicities. They're a true community meeting place.

A few community gardens already exist throughout the Napa Valley, but there's a need for many more.

American Community Garden Association

www.communitygarden.org

Non-profit organization for rural and urban gardening. Free fact sheet on starting a community garden.

Napa County Master Gardeners

<http://groups.ucanr.org/mgnapa/>

Free expert advice and training for gardeners.

Napa Community Garden

info@napacommunitygarden.org

New community garden starting up at Trower and Jefferson streets.

Lobby City Hall to change most zoning to mixed-use

Part of being sustainable means driving less, but that can be very hard to do when the shops and services you need are beyond walking distance. The solution? Bring these shops and services to your neighborhood. To do this, your municipality has to allow “mixed-use zoning”.

For most towns these days, mixed-use zoning means allowing condominiums in the downtown area to encourage live-in shoppers, or in Napa's case, condos as second homes for infrequent high-end visitors. It means living in a commercial area. It is hard yet to find a town that allows “commercialing” in a “living” area. Yet that is what is needed to make residential areas truly livable.

Here, in brief, are some steps that can be taken to retrofit existing neighborhoods, transforming them into social communities with all the services such mini-communities need on an everyday basis.

Local governments should not only allow, but encourage this type of zoning with active support, tax breaks, grants, equipment and labor donations, permit fee reductions or waivers, and any other means they can use to help bring this transformation about.

Small neighborhood businesses not only provide goods and services, they provide jobs—full-time for working adults and part-time for youth and retired persons. City Hall should let people convert homes—particularly foreclosed ones—scattered throughout the area into small businesses. Owners could live in, above, or next door, to their businesses; customers would be able to walk from their homes to the businesses.

- Stores/Shops – small grocery and hardware stores (maybe a “general store”?), laundries, cleaners, barber shops, post office and bank mini-branches, municipal services outlets. Also coffeehouses, cafés and neighborhood-focused restaurants.
- Professional - physicians, dentists, lawyers and the like but also skilled essential services, including computer and gardening consultants, small appliance repair, plumbers, electricians and others whose services are needed in the neighborhood.
- Neighborhood Centers – a place where neighbors can gather for socializing, meetings, classes, day care, home schooling, exercise, games and a large variety of other activities. You may find that a school could be used evenings and weekends as a neighborhood center, but even better would be a building, perhaps even a former home (unfortunately more and more are becoming available), that is dedicated to this purpose.
- Neighborhood Offices – a “co-working” suite of offices with shared staff, office equipment and communications technology where residents can telecommute, or base their home or start-up business.

Other Neighborhood Possibilities

- *Cul de Sac* Paths - Put paths and trails connecting *cul de sacs* with the *cul de sacs* and streets behind them, so that people can easily walk from one location to another without having to wander an endless maze of sidewalks to reach what is actually a close destination.
- Reclaim Streets – Many communities have successfully used techniques of “traffic calming” that make their neighborhoods safe, more attractive and more enjoyable.

Resources

For a list of websites and books on revitalizing neighborhoods, visit www.villagenapa.com/neighborhoods.

Napa Neighborhoods

Neighborhood organizing in Napa comes and goes, usually in response to crime, historical or tree preservation, or developers. Thanks to Napa councilmember Peter Mott, a new coordinating committee called Association of Napa Neighborhoods has formed to assist and mutually coordinate neighborhood associations. You can contact Mott at pmott@sunmasterco.com for more information.

Napa Neighborhoods (as defined for planning purposes by the City of Napa)
<http://tinyurl.com/napaneighborhoods>

Old Town Neighborhood Association
www.napaotna.com

Old Town Napa resident Lisa Gottfried of DigitalWeavers.com has created a website for her neighborhood, and is available for consulting with other neighborhoods who would like to start their own.

Browns Valley Community Advocates
website: www.savebrownsvalley.com

In Harms Way
Citizens for Napa Creek Neighborhood Flood Protection
www.inharmsway-napa.org

South Napa Area Coalition
cmptelcom@sbcglobal.net

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