The Greater Louisville Project

Lessons from America's Best-Run Cities

Neighborhoods: Mission control
and building blocks for responsive government

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White Paper

The third of a series of dialogues
produced in cooperation with
the National Academy of Public Administration

The Greater Louisville Project

The Greater Louisville Project is an initiative designed to bring best-practice thinking to the creation of the new consolidated city-county government. Organized by the Community Foundation of Louisville, the project is financed with the generous support of the James Graham Brown Foundation, The Annie E. Casey Foundation, The C. E. & S. Foundation, The Community Foundation of Louisville, Gheens Foundation and The Humana Foundation.

Project mission: To be a rich resource for the new leaders of the metro government of Greater Louisville and to help ensure that merger makes the greatest possible positive difference for the community.

A community agenda: The Brookings Institution Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy has produced a comprehensive, independent look at how Metro Louisville stacks up in key indicators and policy areas as it becomes the 16th largest city in the United States. "Beyond Merger: A Competitive Vision for the Regional City of Louisville" was released in July 2002.

"Best practice" panels: A series of dialogues, Lessons from America's Best-Run Cities, focuses on the most effective practices in key areas -- government organization, legislative leadership, neighborhood-based initiatives, and education/workforce development. Organized with the National Academy for Public Administration, these workshops bring experts from across the U.S. to share their experiences with local government, business, community and civic leaders.

Spreading the word: The panel sessions are summarized in a series of white papers. Videotapes and transcripts are also available. The public can learn more at the Greater Louisville Project Web site (www.greaterlouisvilleproject.org) and displays at Louisville Free Public Library branches.

"Strong neighborhoods, living your life around neighborhoods, organizing a city around neighborhoods, is not a program. . . It's a way of thinking and doing business and the way you are as a city.

"Stop any of our officials and they will tell you we are a city of neighborhoods and we are about the quality of life in those neighborhoods. It doesn't mean that we don't love big-ticket projects, that we don't love office buildings, that we don't love the San Jose Sharks. But we love our neighborhoods more. We love them first. And we love them all."

> *Del Borgsdorf, City Manager*
> *San Jose, CA., opening speaker*

Introduction

If a neighborhood has a crime problem, chances are it's not just a police issue. It may involve boarded-up or abandoned buildings, vacant lots, families who are struggling, teenagers with nothing to do. So how does a local government effectively tackle that complex mix of challenges?

Or consider a different dilemma -- a city that has many older neighborhoods with deteriorating housing. For years, it has spread around its limited housing-rehab budget, helping a home here, a home there. But officials begin to wonder: Could a different strategy have more impact?

Year after year, it's the "squeaky wheels" -- community activists who speak out forcefully and have political savvy -- who always seem to win city funding for their projects. Is that fair to neighborhoods that aren't so well organized? Is there a way to level the playing field?

These kinds of challenges are encouraging cities across the U.S. to rethink the traditional relationship between government and neighborhoods. They are embracing strategies that link City Hall and citizens in a closer partnership:

> ➤ "Cross-functional" neighborhood teams -- groups of government employees with roots in traditional departments like police, fire and public works -- may become the base unit for delivering city services and tackling complex problems in geographic areas in the community.

> ➤ Local governments are organizing neighborhood associations in all parts of their communities and providing leadership training. The goal is to give *all* residents a vehicle and voice to work with government setting priorities and solving problems.

> ➤ Citizen satisfaction -- government service as viewed from the perspective of the citizen's front porch or the end of the driveway -- is increasingly viewed as the test of whether government is doing its job. Start with that outcome as the bottom line and changes ripple through an organization, reshaping everything from budgets to job descriptions.

Those kinds of neighborhood-based initiatives were described by three long-time government managers when they met with an invited group of more than 50 Louisville community leaders, officials, citizens and Metro Council candidates at a "best-practices" workshop in August 2002. In presentations and question-and-answer sessions, the three described their experiences with a variety of programs in a half-dozen cities from Richmond, Virginia, to San Jose, California.

If they had one lesson for Louisville leaders, it was this: Neighborhood-based initiatives can be the catalyst to do more than simply combine city and county departments in one new bureaucracy January 2003. They live at the heart of a city's mission. And they can be the key to "incremental revolution" that will reshape and ultimately re-invent a more effective, efficient and responsive government that can embrace the ambitious agenda that lies ahead for the new Regional City of Louisville.

The Panel Frames the Challenge

The speakers were:

Connie Bawcum, who spent 10 years as Deputy City Manager in Richmond, Va., before joining the public management consulting firm B&W Partners this year. Richmond's initiatives include nine district teams that plan and set priorities with the help of neighborhood associations and nonprofit, business, civic and tenant groups. Neighborhoods in Bloom is the city's strategic housing revitalization program. Community Assisted Public Safety is a multi-departmental effort to target problem properties.

> *"It's the neighborhoods. It's the neighborhoods regardless of the city you are in. And it's the neighborhoods regardless of the political structure than governs your city. It's the neighborhoods that create a foundation. If you have strong neighborhoods, you're likely to be stronger as a city, as a community."*

Del Borgsdorf, City Manager for the past three years of San Jose, CA., where, he says, neighborhood service is the city "mantra." A 30-year veteran of public management, he earlier served as Assistant City Manager of Charlotte, N.C., where he helped create its "City Within a City" program. That program originally targeted 72 neighborhoods in the core city, using a set of quality-of-life indicators to focus efforts on improvement and chart progress. San Jose's Strong Neighborhoods Initiative includes neighborhood plans, teams and goals defined in terms of outcomes for residents.

> *"No matter how you come at local government, it's incremental revolution that counts. It takes a long time for local governments to change their stripes, their cultures, their way of doing business."*

Valerie A. Lemmie, City Manager since April for the city of Cincinnati. She served earlier as City Manager in Dayton, Ohio, where neighborhood-based planning takes several forms, including leadership training for community groups and elected neighborhood priority boards, established in 1969, which provide institutionalized citizen participation.

> *"If you want something different, you have to structure it, organize it, account for it and measure it differently . . . Everyone says they want to change the system but usually that means they want everyone else to change."*

Organizing Around Neighborhoods: A New Framework for Leadership

> *"It has to be mission-driven if it's gong to be neighborhood-focused. And you have to mean it. Cities have forever counted stuff. We can tell you, for example, that Parks and Recreation served 694,00 people last year. Then we did ratios and said, 'We served them at a cost of $6.12 per class . . . we're more efficient than anyone.'*
>
> *"What we don't do is, 'Who cares? What difference did it make?' If I'm standing in my driveway and there's garbage on the street after the crew goes by, the service sucks. It doesn't matter if it's $2.11 a mile if it looks ugly. We don't measure ugly and customer satisfaction.*
>
> <div align="right">Del Borgsdorf</div>

Change doesn't come overnight to governments that have long organized around traditional departments and measured work by its processes: arrests made, road-miles paved, tons of garbage collected. It takes root step-by-step.

Cities with experience in neighborhood-based initiatives have learned that they can be a starting point for change that reverberates throughout government -- starting with how it defines its mission, reshaping how it approaches its work, changing its relationship with residents, revamping job descriptions and, perhaps most important, redefining the way it evaluates its performance.

It is a process, even when given a hearty jump-start with strong leadership and training, that is likely to take time. Programs in other cities offer vivid examples of how those steps come together.

"Cross functional teams": Where the work gets done

> *"In the traditional structures of government -- the Department of Solid Waste, the Department of Public Works, the Division of Police -- each assumes a specific function in the range of services that a neighborhood needs. . . But as the world has grown increasingly complex, neighborhood problems cross departmental lines. So, the theory is, the work should also cross departmental lines."*
> <div align="right">Carolyn Gatz, Director, The Greater Louisville Project</div>

No single blueprint exists as a guide for creating effective teams. Think of junior high school as one model, suggested Robert J. O'Neill, president of the National Academy of Public Administration, when he introduced the idea of cross-functional teams at the first Greater Louisville Project workshop on government organization in April 2002. City workers keep "homeroom" -- a traditional department -- as a home base. But they spend their problem-solving time with a team of representatives from other departments serving their territory.

Such teams offer distinct advantages:

Teams keep the focus on community needs, not departmental turf. It's the governmental equivalent of Marshall McLuhan's "The medium is the message." The structure of government institutionalizes your priorities: delivery of services to those citizens.

"They do not care how we are organized," said Del Borgsdorf. "They only care that we deliver."

Teams solve problems more efficiently. Around a table, teams can brainstorm and resolve complex questions on the spot. Out in the community, they encourage every worker, as a team member, to expedite problem-solving. One example: A city worker finds an empty house surrounded by tall weeds and an abandoned car when he arrives for a pre-loan housing-code inspection. A neighbor tells him the resident is in the hospital. The inspector dispatches the social worker to visit her to get forms signed, calls to get the yard cut and arranges to have the car taken to a city lot for storage.

Teams build on community strength. By serving neighborhoods, they start from a position that acknowledges the integrity and assets of the community as it exists for its residents.

Teams are 'smarter.' Not all neighborhoods have the same problems. Dedicated teams let staff know the particular strengths and challenges of each neighborhood and tackle their unique mix of needs more effectively.

Teams motivate. You meet your "customers" at neighborhood meetings. You see the problems in their communities first hand -- not just on paper or via phone calls from a desk in City Hall.

Teams keep the focus on 'the driveway.' A community needs a streetlight? In a traditional department structure, it is possible to view the processing of a requisition as mission accomplished. Not if the outcome is the bottom line. From the neighborhood perspective, only one question counts: Is the light on?

Neighborhood Assessment: Cornerstone of Planning

The richness of city life may come from the varied tapestry of neighborhoods that make up its fabric. But how does local government tailor services to patches on its map with such different stripes and patterns?

Neighborhood assessment is critical. The need for community-wide neighborhood planning, a recommendation in the Brookings Institution's study of Louisville, "Beyond Merger," was underscored by workshop speakers.

Neighborhood plans serve as statistical portraits. They define demographics, land use, economic characteristics and other factors over time -- information that is useful for government, neighborhood leaders, and private-sector interests, from lending institutions to land developers. They define neighborhood strengths and challenges.

Plans build city-neighborhood partnerships. The creation of a neighborhood plan is often a joint effort. That process can harness the knowledge of neighborhood residents and reflect their concerns -- as well as the technical skills and experience of government planners and community development staff.

Plans get citizens and government 'on the same page.' An assessment -- data-rich and detailed, illuminating both assets and challenges -- provides a common basis for working together.

Plans help government plan strategically. By looking at all neighborhoods, cities can find patterns, focus their energies and develop neighborhood-based strategies. The Brookings report on Louisville highlights Kansas City's system of identifying neighborhood "typologies" -- categories that broadly describe their condition. That city's classifications -- developing, conservation, stabilization and redeveloping -- help the community set priorities and goals.

Plans provide a baseline to assess progress. They can help answer the question of whether city initiatives are having an impact. Has that housing program brought more young residents to that neighborhood? Are students missing less school, thanks to new health facilities? Have new businesses been drawn to crucial commercial strips?

Neighborhood empowerment: A richer partnership

> *"Traditionally those who knew government best got things done and they guarded that knowledge jealously . . . You make it fair so everyone knows the rules of the game and everyone gets to compete."*
>
> *Valerie Lemmie*

> *"The way to make sure everyone has a voice was to help every neighborhood get organized."*
>
> *Connie Bawcum*

At the heart of many neighborhood-based initiatives is a notion that may seem radical: Organized neighborhoods where strong leadership is built make better partners for government. With their knowledge and dedication to their community, they can be allies, colleagues, fellow problem-solvers and a strong reality check on whether government is really delivering.

For that reason, many cities are investing in community organizing of all neighborhoods and building strong leadership by providing training for residents.

Community-wide neighborhood organizing 'levels the playing field.' It puts on more equal footing the diverse neighborhoods throughout a community -- from those with well-established neighborhood associations to those that have no tradition of coming together to address common concerns.

It builds community strength. Finding cohesiveness in areas that haven't had neighborhood organizations is healthy for those residents. As they find their voice, it inevitably opens government to new perspectives.

Over time, trust and collaboration can translate to a truer democracy. Neighborhood leaders who are partners can help set priorities. They may more easily see "big picture" issues beyond their boundaries. And they also have the knowledge and savvy to hold government more accountable. It 'de-mystifies' government. Whether they open "neighborhood academies" on weekends or sponsor for-credit courses through local colleges, more and more governments offer leadership training for neighborhood residents. Established neighborhood leaders may run workshops on how to create a durable organization, work on a neighborhood plan, collaborate with developers or get publicity from the local newspaper.

"It is a lot different when residents come to the city council with a neighborhood plan than to when they come to complain about a problem. They sing! They say things like 'I have never felt so proud to be a part of this city.' I feel like you are on my side. It changes the chemistry of the relationship. You are not responsible for it all. "

Del Borgsdorf

"Citizen engagement creates improved government performance because it provides a higher level of accountability. . . Bureaucrats can hide from citizens who don't know how government works. . . None of us want to spend our days with citizens in our face complaining about what wasn't getting done."

Valerie Lemmie

"Over 14 years, a positive relationship of trust built up gradually. The city would say, 'There's a problem. How can we work together to solve this?'"

Connie Bawcum

Putting it all together: How it works in the community

"The first principle of neighborhood responsiveness is that all neighborhoods are not the same. One size doesn't fit all. Some are more deteriorated. They have different needs. They have different strengths. And once you've started prioritizing neighborhoods, you've lit the fuse."

Del Borgsdorf

How does government focus on community needs and customer service yet deal with the realities of limited resources and political pressures?

The workshop speakers offered a number of case studies -- examples from their experiences in both day-in, day-out decision-making and establishing sometimes-controversial strategic programs. Among them were these stories.

The neighborhood laundry list: Data speaks louder than words

If neighborhood residents are strong advocates for their community's needs, they are likely to have a long list of potential projects for a city's to-do list. But in a culture where a real partnership is encouraged and planning has occurred, there can be a different kind of give-and-take over priorities, said Del Borgsdorf:

"You can say to a neighborhood, 'You can have 100 things you want us to do but we are only going to listen to the top 10 and we are probably only going to do the top 3. . .and not all of those if the first one has a huge price tag.' " So neighborhood leaders pare back the list.

But at the top is a teen center. Next comes a road repaving. Now the problem is: City officials don't agree with those priorities. This neighborhood has an aging population -- that's clear from the neighborhood assessment's demographic data. As for the street paving -- a detailed city survey of all road surfaces shows it is not in bad shape compared to many others.

"Political compromise is part of it. But we do a lot of neighborhood-based data collection so you cannot simply come in and argue. You change a lot of minds when you can say the neighborhood resident's median age is 52 and by any objective analysis of traffic and pavement conditions, that street comes in 104th." The bottom line, said Borgsdorf: Good data makes good neighbors.

Making strategic choices: Profiles in courage

A few years ago, city officials in Richmond, Va., decided they needed to make a drastic change in how they were spending $7 million in housing and neighborhood revitalization funds. Spread over 20 neighborhoods, Connie Bawcum said, the impact was disappointing. "We were saving a house, helping a family and losing the whole block around them."

Their solution: to triage.

They decided to focus the Neighborhoods in Bloom program on just six neighborhoods -- and within those six, to target specific blocks. "When you have neighborhoods with that kind of need," she said, "it takes some really gutsy people to say, 'We can't serve them all.'"

To choose the six neighborhoods, three groups -- city officials, neighborhood leaders and a housing-sector task force -- worked independently. They evaluated 49 neighborhoods, using demographic, crime and housing data as well as other indicators. On a more subjective level, they assessed the strength of neighborhood organizations as potential partners.

To their amazement, said Bawcum, when the three groups, working separately, came together, all three had the same five neighborhoods on their lists. They voted to choose the sixth.

"It was the most incredible public process I've ever witnessed. . . Someone from a neighborhood that wasn't chosen actually stood up   at a meeting and said, 'I want my neighborhood to be part of Neighborhoods in Bloom. But I know this process has been so fair, so inclusive, that I accept this list."

The program has managed to attract about $3 in private investment for each dollar in public funds. "We are starting to turn the corner in many of the neighborhoods," said Bawcum.

Count among its priceless successes neighborhood organizing and governmental courage, said Greater Louisville Project director Carolyn Gatz, who has spent eight years doing community development work:

"The organizational capacity, the neighborhood organizing, that allowed a process like that to occur -- it is a huge feat to be at a point where neighborhood residents can come together and set priorities among areas. And the willingness to make investments strategic rather than everyone competing to carve up the pie -- that is phenomenal in my experience."

The SWAT Team: All-out war on problem properties

- ✓ A house with a reputation for drug traffic and reckless partying.
- ✓ A park that gives neighbors shivers after dark.
- ✓ Boarded-up storefronts at a key intersection.

In Richmond, some residents felt the city didn't have an effective system for dealing with the urban eyesores and troublesome crime spots that can make neighbors feel their area is on the decline.

In response, the city started a program called Community Assisted Public Safety (or CAPS), which uses cross-functional teamwork to tackle problem properties. Citizens help identify the top 10 problem addresses in each of six city districts. Then city officials get to work.

In a typical case, several city departments may have heard about problems at 100 Oak St., said Connie Bawcum. But they have dealt with them at different times in an uncoordinated way:

"The police would be there today, code enforcement would be there next week, the social worker the week after that. The light bulb finally came on: If everyone went out there right now and addressed everything to the max, then maybe we wouldn't be going to the same property over and over."

The strategy -- "to throw as many legal remedies at every problem property that we can" -- involves police, zoning, health, fire, tax enforcement, fire and building and environmental code enforcement staff.

It's supported by a half dozen other agencies and includes citizen participation. Government lawyers "are very aggressive about taking folks to court." It has huge fans in the neighborhoods but the team-oriented problem solving approach has been a stretch, she said.
"It isn't the culture of the rest of the organization." So, she said, it remains a work in progress.

Putting it all together: Reshaping life inside City Hall

> *"Every employee, given important work to do, exceeds your expectations."*
> *Del Borgsdorf*

The "incremental revolution" of changing government can translate to "huge shock" for government's workers. Their jobs may be transformed.

No more quiet days in that cubicle at City Hall. Now there are daily team meetings, regular night outings to neighborhood events, new guidelines to meet to get a raise. You're a traffic engineer -- but that doesn't stop people out in the community from complaining to you about broken park swings and garbage-strewn alleys.

So it goes when you are on the front line of change: "If it doesn't get from a city council table to the front seat of a patrol car," Borgsdorf said, "it didn't happen."

But how does government manage to get its front line mobilized?

Communication is critical. From mission to performance measurement, big-picture issues need explaining. "Weekend warrioring" with city employees is one strategy for getting people on board and up to speed. In terms of department heads, said Borgsdorf, "the honest term would be insisting on this approach."

Employee groups are at the table "from Day 1." Labor unions were plugged into new initiatives in Dayton and San Jose as they were planned. "It's important to get their input because they know what's going on," said Valerie Lemmie, "and because it gets their buy-in . . . They don't want to see all this happening and not be a part of it."

Training is essential. Aside from any new technical skills, don't underestimate the challenges in new ways of working with colleagues and citizens, said Valerie Lemmie. "Don't assume people know how to function in teams -- or when to call a meeting, how to listen or how to write an agenda. Older workers may even see teamwork as cheating -- they grew up in a culture that emphasized individual effort."

Job descriptions -- and how you evaluate workers -- are likely to change. In San Jose, for example, police officers are expected to spend 35 percent of their time in non-crime-related activities -- in "neighborhood-based problem-solving," said Del Borgsdorf. He also sketched out contrasting profiles for a job-training placement worker.

> *Traditional model:* She is at her desk 8-5, handles intake, links applicants with jobs, measures success in numbers placed.

> *Alternative version:* She works in a community that has said its No. 1 priority is creating neighborhoods where residents feel safe. John is repeatedly mentioned as a key player in juvenile crime in one area. So this job placement worker visits that neighborhood for several evenings, meets John's grandmother, gets to know her. Eventually she meets John. She finds him a job that gives his life new structure and meaning. Crime problems diminish.

"Worker A placed 246 people. Worker B placed 1," said Borgsdorf. "You've got to decide what the outcome is that you want to accomplish."

Recognize that culture change is gradual. "You can't change the entire organization at one time," said Valerie Lemmie. Borgsdorf said, "A lot of the problem is us, the full-time paid career employee . . . One reason I am so enamored of neighborhoods as an organizing principle is that there isn't the patience. There is energy."

But make clear that culture change is mandatory. You've provided training, coached workers in terms of vision and values and given them a chance to perform. You've given it time -- maybe even years -- and they don't buy in? "If I don't want to go there," said Valerie Lemmie, "I can leave."

Lessons for Louisville: Final thoughts

The three speakers offered some parting words for Louisville leaders.

Understand that change is disturbing -- and merger alone will inevitably propel city leaders, workers and citizens "outside their comfort zone," said Valerie Lemmie. But the potential payoff for making change in business-as-usual is profound:

"The vacuum, the citizenship gap, the dead-air space between citizens and their government is what you have to face. You have the challenge and the opportunity to close the gap -- to have a seamless relationship between your community and its government."

Where would Connie Bawcum start? "I can't think of a better place to start than to create a public report card -- establish four or five of the most important things you want to accomplish. They are very specific. They are very measurable. They are very public. And then say, 'OK, we organize to reduce crime by X percent,' or whatever. Start with the big-picture outcome and let the culture change as you focus on that."

"Create something new," said Del Borgsdorf. "You have an unprecedented opportunity here. Don't simply merge government structures unless they are perfectly effective. Build a new organization. . . You will never have all the answers. The direction is the main thing."

Appendix

"Beyond Merger: A Competitive Vision for the Regional City of Louisville," the report by the Brookings Institution Center on Urban & Metropolitan Policy released in July, 2002, listed creating strong neighborhoods as one of five key strategies for a competitive cities agenda.

"Quality neighborhoods are a precondition for city competitiveness. These communities of quality must include neighborhoods with vital residential areas and commercial markets . . . places that gather families with a mix of incomes . . . places with amenities such as parks, libraries and community centers.

"Competitive cities build neighborhoods that are livable and distinctive and offer residents a range of housing, transportation and recreational choices."

Stimulating ideas -- and questions -- from Louisville participants

If workshop speakers "sowed seeds" of new ideas, as one put it, the participants had several chances during the day to mull over which ones should take root.

During the day devoted to neighborhood-based initiatives that have worked in other communities, the Louisville residents in the audience were asked to discuss them in small groups: Which ones, they were asked, have special value for this community as it faces the challenge of consolidation?

Here are some of their responses -- and some questions they raised:

➢ Merger is an opportunity for local government to rethink its mission and structure.

➢ Don't just combine city and county departments. Create something new and better.

➢ Cross-functional teams -- city workers from different departments organized around neighborhood areas -- seem like an effective way to serve residents. But it may be a challenge to get employees to buy in -- unions and civil service workers, in particular.

➢ Cultivating strong neighborhood organizations will be healthy for the community and an effective tool for creating effective government/citizen partnerships. But how do you create such groups in suburban areas without a tradition of neighborhood organization? Just how do you define "neighborhood?" And how do you help new neighborhood leaders learn the language and process of government so they can effectively connect?

➢ It's important to "expand the table" -- that is, to engage involvement beyond the regulars who never miss a public meeting. The prospect of neighborhood groups playing a role in responding to citizen complaints -- not just in identifying them -- also held appeal.

➢ Evaluating government's effectiveness in terms of customer service -- that is, "from the driveway" -- makes sense. But doesn't government also need to look at larger patterns across neighborhood lines -- big-picture issues?

➢ The new Louisville Metro Council, the legislative body of the new government, will face a parallel challenge to be attentive to district resident concerns but also to take its leadership role seriously and grapple with the community's larger needs.

➢ It makes sense to "triage" community needs and target special neighborhood problems. As one participant put it, "One size doesn't fit all." Or as another put it, "Equal may not really be fair." At the same time, government can expect to get political heat, to hear neighborhoods complain if services are not offered to all.

➢ Training for neighborhood leaders is a good idea. "We don't even have a common language," said one resident. "The public doesn't know the language bureaucrats speak."

➢ Neighborhood-based cross-functional teams should serve territory drawn to overlap the district lines for Metro Council seats. That will encourage cooperation and collaboration and "de-politicize" the process.

➢ The notion of a "citizenship gap" or disconnect between government and the people it serves has special resonance in light of Louisville's government consolidation. Merger has both raised community expectations and increased fears among some residents that change may mean their voices are not heard.

➢ Changing the culture of government will be a challenge.

➢ The time frame Louisville faces seems daunting: With merger just a few months away, it seems like an overwhelming task to be innovative yet keep basic services stable.

➢ It might make strategic sense for Louisville, faced with limited resources, to focus its greatest investments in neighborhoods in transition. To head off a downward spiral seems more critical than pouring resources into an area with decay that may not be reversible. Also, it may take very substantial spending to make a difference in neighborhoods even in early stages of decline.