

City of Riverside

Our Riverside, Our Neighborhoods (ORON)

Sponsoring Agency: Neighborhood Engagement Division, Community and Economic Development Department, City of Riverside

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The Problem: City leaders typically have a healthy bias for top-down, city-initiated action. But what if top-down control isn't always best? What if citizens began taking responsibility for the quality and safety of their own neighborhoods and communities?

Community and city leaders were seeking ways to celebrate the diverse cultural heritage and unique identities of Riverside's 26 neighborhoods, and ORON (Our Riverside, Our Neighborhoods) launched in 2014 addressed this element. Prior efforts to build community and foster neighborhood identity were mostly top-down, resulting in neighborhood visions that residents did not feel they owned.

ORON grew out of a public-private partnership involving the Riverside Neighborhood Partnership (RNP) called Seizing Our Destiny (SOD). As part of SOD, the City commissioned a [Quality of Life Survey](#). 'Riversiders' had pride in their city and positive views of its educational opportunity, and the active and healthy culture. But residents involved with SOD and staff in the Neighborhoods Division noticed an area for improvement: while 42% of respondents said they knew their neighbors well and the majority had local friends they could rely on for help, at least 19% of respondents could not even name the neighborhood in which they resided. There wasn't really a connection or an identification of that sense of place in their neighborhood.

A Sense of Place also fit with ongoing conversations among community development groups including the RNP about how to encourage proactive partnership among community residents, as opposed to negative, issue or problem-based discussions that often lead to frustration.

The Proposed Solution: A collaborative effort with the Riverside Neighborhood Partnership (RNP) and Riverside residents, ORON is resident-focused and resident-led. Committed residents formed a leadership team of Project Champions, which serves as a steering committee.

ORON would also be different by being oriented around a strategy called "[Asset-Based Community Development](#)" (ABCD). ABCD is about shifting city leaders' and residents' attitudes from a focus on issues and problems to a focus on strengths and gifts latent in the community. This way when challenges arise, residents and neighborhood associations are better equipped to meet them by applying their own strengths and skills, working together. Sennewald explained why ORON adopted this approach:

The idea behind the initiative is to utilize [ABCD] principles to first work with residents to define the assets of the neighborhoods and then figure out ways to utilize those assets to create positive change and forward motion to having the neighborhood of their dreams.

The entire initiative is resident-driven and resident led. City officials play a facilitative role—no less important than direct leadership, but very different from business as usual in most cities. ABCD calls on residents to take more responsibility for the quality and safety of their neighborhoods, acting as leaders and “producers” rather than merely “customers” or “victims.”

Sennewald and the Project Champions tasked Terri Larson (city consultant with knowledge of ABCD) with re-imagining her standard asset-mapping training to make it more “festive,” than a lecture format. She recommended a “Neighbor Fest!”—a street-fair style community event where residents have the opportunity to celebrate their neighborhood and talk about the resources, talents, interests, and existing networks available to contribute to the flourishing of their community. The Project Champions creatively tailored ABCD principles to the needs of their initiative and their neighborhoods in ways they felt better facilitated community building.

Goals: ORON has two goals:

- 1) Build Community.
- 2) Facilitate creation of resident-crafted Neighborhood Strategies for each of Riverside’s 26 neighborhoods.

Outputs: Project Champions hosted the inaugural Neighbor Fest in [Area 2](#), which includes the Eastside and University neighborhoods. “We were all saying if we got 50 people there, we would be happy because it’s the first one,” Larson recalled. “That first day...we [reached over] 500 people.” Larson was happy with the atmosphere and how residents responded:

I felt real positive energy the whole day and we had a variety of people, we had homeowners and renters, a diverse group of people, we had even some of our un-housed neighbors there, and it was just a really great day.

In addition to music and cookouts, Neighbor Fest events include activity booths for residents to visit that encourage thinking about their neighborhood in ABCD terms. Damien O’Farrell, an ORON Project Champion, enjoyed working one of the booths called Point of View: “It focuses on moving from a needs-based approach to an asset-based approach in addressing or building up our neighborhoods.” He remembers “seeing people’s eyes light up” when they imagined a community where neighbors don’t wait for problems to crop up, but instead regularly celebrate their neighborhood and work together to make it a better place. He says the idea of ABCD—focusing on strengths and latent assets instead of problems—is starting to catch on. He consistently hears residents who come to Neighbor Fest say that the ABCD approach “would most definitely help us feel more empowered to address issues when they [do] come up.”

The major change will be for the existing neighborhood associations to shift from an issue focus to a community-building focus. This will be a significant shift for some neighborhood associations to make, as they have organized around identifying problems in the neighborhood and asking the city to solve them.

After the Neighbor Fest events, Phase II of ORON is for residents to develop Neighborhood Strategies in each neighborhood. Different from a “plan” in the urban planning sense, the Strategy will include a vision of what residents in each neighborhood view as their story, the unique patchwork of resources and gifts their community treasures, and their goals for the future.

This phase will be almost purely resident-driven, and it may look different in each community. Beginning with a series of activities designed to help residents shift from a “victim” to a “producer” mindset, the strategy creation process will culminate in establishing a process to achieve specific neighborhood goals. Residents will have a chance to identify specific goals that fit into three “buckets”—with the goal being to focus mostly on Bucket #1:

1. Full Ownership: Goals residents can or should accomplish completely on their own, leveraging latent talents, skills, and passions in the community – *establishing neighborhood watch programs or clubs based on shared interests...and more!*
2. Partial Ownership: Goals residents can accomplish with some outside assistance from the city, either through public-private partnerships or directly – *improvement projects for public spaces; fundraising for schools and community organizations*
3. City Ownership: Goals residents need outside help to accomplish – *paving roads or constructing city parks*

Outcomes: So far, Riverside has hosted a total of five Neighbor Fests, so there is a long way to go over the next couple years to engage each neighborhood in ORON. The ORON Champions have committed to holding another three Neighbor Fest events in 2016 and have been invited into the Northside Neighborhood to move ahead with Phase II, the visioning and strategy process.

In addition to enhancing the process for capturing and leveraging data gathered from Neighbor Fest events, the Champions are working to get more neighborhood leaders and associations involved, building on momentum ORON has sparked. “The process is still evolving and will probably be different for each neighborhood that we reach,” Sennewald remarked. “As long as the passion is alive and residents have a love for where they live, this initiative will continue to move forward and will end up being sustainable as changes are made within each neighborhood.”

ORON has generated excitement, but the process has required enormous commitment, especially from the Project Champions. They meet on a monthly basis, strategizing and participating in training on ABCD and dialogue facilitation. They have also had to self-assess and reevaluate continuously, adapting to the public’s response.

Lessons Learned:

- Be creative
- Try something new
- A huge potential lies within the skills, assets and experience of residents themselves
- Empower people to unleash untapped skills and resources
- Get residents thinking about what they can contribute to their neighborhood – they might surprise you!
- Plan for follow-up engagement
- Self-assess
- Be flexible
- Learn from mistakes
- Engage, empower, and partner with committed resident leaders

- Continuously adapt
- Learn by doing.
- Be patient—but also persistent
- Start small but grow big
- Champions and passion are essential ingredients
- To improve is to disrupt the status quo

What Can Be Replicated? Most all of this approach. ORON has seen its share of both successes and setbacks so far, and the process is evolving. There's a lot of work left to do, and the outcomes are somewhat unpredictable because they will be tailored to the aspirations and visions of each neighborhood's residents.

But there's something special going on in Riverside. Riverside leaders are taking a risk: trusting and empowering residents to seize their neighborhoods' destinies and chart their own courses. Building community from the grassroots up isn't a new idea, but it's rarely attempted with such concerted effort.

Unfortunately most city governments just aren't prepared to play a facilitative, empowering role—operating on a top-down service-delivery model. Most city governments are so concerned with being in control they are unable to see the power and potential of empowering their residents within their neighborhoods.

ORON's Project Champions are blazing a new trail, perhaps even piloting a revitalized social compact between local government and citizens. Maybe this new model can help restore neighborhoods and communities in California and beyond—maybe even your city, your neighborhood.

Resources: Ashley is following up to see if there were any city reports, articles etc on this that should be included.