

The Role of Grass Roots Community Development Organizations within Community Development Initiatives

Author : Clarence Terry

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We have witnessed and participated in the dialogue between community, politicians, government, nonprofits and other stakeholders when a well-meaning economic development initiative came to a community they care for. Old East Durham is a community undergoing rapid transformation, with issues of displacement and gentrification widely acknowledged. Economic benefits for the members of the community whose profiles in material poverty were used to justify the initiative very much **remain an open question.**

We are aware that the portrayal in this article of politicians, government officials and nonprofits is somewhat flattened and that these stakeholders, individually and collectively, have additional incentives, but **the incentives we focus on exist, dominate, and are ignored at great peril to the community.**

At the beginning of an economic development initiative, populations that are low-income, that are predominantly African-American and that have low home-ownership rates are referred to as the “community” and, at the end of an economic development initiative, populations that are higher-income, that are whiter and that have higher home-ownership rates also are referred to as the “community.” This is not wrong *per se*, but the reality that many of **the individuals living within the area of economic development at the beginning of the initiative have moved out** and have been replaced with whiter, higher income residents, many of whom have driven up home-ownership rates **is rarely acknowledged.**

It is our proposition that it is the role of grass roots community organizations to ensure that the ambiguity caused by the good will, hospitality, grace and sense of inclusion inherent in the word “community” is used in a measured way and that there is minimum ability to **use that ambiguity to mask state-subsidized displacement of low-income, African-American renters** or to switch promised improvements in individual lives with improvements to amenities, especially in neighborhoods whose houses are already more firmly on the path to financial appreciation than their residents.

In order to play its role effectively, a community grass roots organization **needs to know what incentives other stakeholders have**, and make sure that the organization only confers credibility, legitimacy and respect on those stakeholders who try to **direct economic development initiative benefits** (financial rewards, by and large) **to those members of the community whose economic profiles were used to sell the economic development initiative** to politicians, other government officials, nonprofits, civic and religious institutions.

A community grass roots organization that is **too quick to confer its credibility, legitimacy and respect** on other stakeholders risks not only losing its credibility, legitimacy and respect, it also **runs the risk of failing to protect politicians, other government officials, and nonprofits from accusations of bait and switch, mismanagement of metrics, and community exploitation.** (Which isn't to say that a community grass roots organization that confers its credibility, legitimacy and respect too slowly cannot be rendered irrelevant over time or be accused of trying to “extract” too much economic benefit for the people who are the intended beneficiaries of the economic

development initiative.)

- **Politicians.** Politicians are going to politic (i.e., favor groups more likely to vote in their favor, especially in an organized and denser manner). Here, the grass roots community group might be better positioned to offer guidance couched in political terms. “We support the [insert politicians’ name or titles], and the vision of the economic development initiative as originally portrayed, especially in its ability to help low-income, predominantly African-American renters in this community. No one likes to support politicians who can’t control their own initiatives.”
- **Government officials.** Government officials are there to seek favor from the politicians referred to above. Here, the grass roots community organization may be most effective publicly reminding the government officials of the goals of the community development initiative – as proclaimed by the politicians – and warn the officials of the need to follow those directions. No one likes a government official who uses power, subject matter expertise and position to advance agendas that are distinct from the public guidance offered by those we have elected.
- **Nonprofits.** Just as a politician must politic, nonprofits must raise money. They use the statistical (and individual) profiles in material poverty of community members to raise money. Before moving on to another community, the nonprofits will need to use the statistical (and, to a lesser degree, individual) profiles in material wealth or income improvement to show success so that the nonprofit can be entrusted to work in the next community. Knowing this, a grass roots community organization can publicly encourage nonprofits to direct their benefits, programming jobs to the low-income, predominantly African-American renters in the community.

Conclusion. Communities change. It’s inherent in the word, “community,” but the pace, reasons, nature and process around that change are topics worthy of candid and, at times, hard discussion.

Unless the community grass roots organization uses its credibility, legitimacy and respect to keep everyone on task, the economic development initiative will succeed for everyone – **except the members of the community whose profiles in material poverty were used to justify the initiative in the first place.**