



Neighborhood Involvement

Special Report

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Report

Everyone wants strong, safe, healthy cities. Much money is spent every year on city improvements. What many do not realize is that one of the easiest and best ways to improve a city is for a person simply to be involved in his or her neighborhood. However, there is a declining trend in neighborhood involvement. This is a serious problem, especially as it causes a neighborhood to miss the benefits it would have if it were strong. This paper will state some of benefits of living in a strong, “good” neighborhood, and then analyze the trend of neighborhood involvement in St. Petersburg.

The benefits of strong neighborhoods are numerous. In a 2009 article in the *Journal of Urban Affairs*, Fenne Pinkster of the University of Amsterdam cites several studies that indicate that people from “disadvantaged” neighborhoods are less likely to get good jobs, possibly because they have smaller networks of people from which to draw when applying for a job. In economic circumstances like the circumstances of the present, when employment is that much harder to acquire, these smaller networks can be crippling.

However, there are other, sometimes less obvious, benefits of living in a strong neighborhood. To illustrate this, there is the information in a 2009 article from the journal *Health and Social Work*. This article presents a study that reveals that children who live in neighborhoods that their parents consider “safe” play outdoors more than their counterparts in neighborhoods considered “unsafe.” While this seems obvious, the study also found that, as a trade-off, the children who play outdoors watch, on average, 1.2 hours less of television a day than those who stay inside because of “unsafe” neighborhoods.

Because of the fact that people in less “safe” neighborhoods are uncomfortable spending time outside, it has been proven that obesity, in adolescents in particular, is directly related to neighborhood quality. An article in the medical journal *BMC Public Health* from August of 2009 tells about this relation. The article says that, since people feel unsafe, it curbs active behavior and fosters more lazy behavior. This in turn contributes to adolescent obesity.

Finally, a study presented in the *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* in March 2009 relates that families with lower incomes who tend to live in less affluent neighborhoods draw more on social services. This seems self-evident and inconclusive, but the article also goes on to state that the social pressures of a more prosperous neighborhood influence people to opt to stay out of certain welfare programs, such as Medicaid. In the absence of government assistance, people have more of an opportunity to improve themselves. This contributes back to the success of the neighborhood.

In light of all of these benefits, it seems that every neighborhood should be strong and vibrant. However, statistics do not bear this out. In preparation for this assignment, the author sent a mass email to most of the presidents and/or contact persons of the neighborhoods in this city. The email asked them to provide the approximate number of homes in their neighborhood and the approximate number of currently paying members. This summary is compiled from information received from thirteen neighborhood associations in the City of St. Petersburg. (The results of the data are summarized in the attached table.) The study found that the average percentage of residents that are paying members in their neighborhood association is 25 percent. In addition to this, at least two neighborhood associations, Garden Manor and Euclid Heights, are defunct from lack of participation. Finally, the number of paid members does not always represent the number of residents that actually show up to the meetings accurately. For example, Harbor Isles has roughly 180 paying members, but the email received from that association states that attendance at the monthly meetings averages between 10 to 12 people a month. It appears that the majority of the citizens of St. Petersburg do not enjoy the benefits of a strong neighborhood. This is the trend in the neighborhoods our fair city.

Neighborhood	# of Homes	# of Paid Members	Percentage
Old Southeast	650	200	31%
Historic Kenwood	1100	270	25%
Venetian Isles	530	350	65%
Causeway Isles	410	180	44%
Holiday Park	720	20	3%
Harbor Isles	220	180	80%
Garden Manor	206	0	0%
Euclid Heights	1200	0	0%
Euclid/St. Paul's	1200	80	7%
Northeast Terraces	80	20	20%
Azalea	800	40	5%

References

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Interview with Dominick Griesi, President of the Azalea Neighborhood Association

What is the most important part of neighborhood involvement?

DG: The most important thing is being involved and bringing the community closer together. It is important that people know their neighbors, because this makes the neighborhood solid, so that when people see strangers, they recognize them as strangers. This is helpful when a stranger causes a problem in the neighborhood.

How has the Azalea association affected the neighborhood crime rate?

DG: We have been keeping neighbors informed that the police want you to call if you think that something is suspicious, because it could turn into something big. That is how the two kids responsible for a recent arson were caught. As result of this effort, I would say the crime rate is down.

What effect has Azalea had on the city government of St. Petersburg?

DG: The Azalea association lets people in local government know that the West End is an important part of the voting public, and that we are committed to informing our citizens about the various candidates seeking office.

Why does the number of paying members reflect such a small percentage of the homeowners in your area?

DG: Many seniors left our neighborhood recently. We have also had several foreclosures as well as many new people in neighborhood, and these new people do not know that we are here. In addition, after the Raytheon issue blew over many people left us after they realized that they were not getting a settlement out of it. Finally, the Tampa Bay Times has changed its policy and no longer advertises our monthly speaker.

What is the best way for a person to get involved in their neighborhood?

DG: Just be aware of when and where the meetings are, and who speakers are, and come.

Interview with Peter James, President of Causeway Isles Neighborhood Association

What is neighborhood involvement important to you?

PJ: Neighborhood involvement brings the residents together for civic and social reasons. It also helps to ensure that the neighborhood is a good place to live, as well as a good place to retire. We are also involved on lobbying the city, recently starting a new initiative for the rehabilitation of a shopping center on the West Side of St. Petersburg and about the pier.

Tell me a little bit about your neighborhood crime watch.

PJ: We have traffic issues more than crime. We had five crimes last year and all but one, involving the theft of a garden gnome, were solved. We have an established crime watch, which we are in the process of enlarging. We are starting a social watch that inconspicuously keeps an eye on elderly residents to make sure they are getting their newspapers in and that they are in their home. We also have a pet watch. All of the pets on the islands are registered so if one goes missing, everyone knows what kind of animal it is, and we have a picture, etc. ready to go out to the neighborhood.

Do your general monthly meetings reflect your high membership numbers?

PJ: No, we do not have a monthly general meeting. We have a board of 10 that meets every month and then reports to the members. We have three forms of communication by which we report to our members: email, a quarterly newsletter, and a website/Facebook page.

Where do you see the neighborhoods of St. Petersburg going in the near future?

PJ: Neighborhoods in St. Petersburg need to overcome apathy and insufficient support. They also need to realize that it is okay to call out the elected officials when they make a mistake.

What is the best way for a person to be involved in their neighborhood?

PJ: The best way is just to take part. In addition, more people just need to understand what contribution their neighborhood association makes.

Interview with Pete Olivares, President of Old Southeast Neighborhood Association

What is the most important facet of neighborhood involvement?

PO: I would say a sense of community and participation is most important.

How does your neighborhood association affect crime rates in your area?

PO: We are unique in the fact that we have many social services, so we have our share of petty crime. However since we communicate as a neighborhood it helps if someone sees a suspicious person. According to what I have been told, there seems to be less crime since the neighborhood communicates.

What is your neighborhood's role in city government?

PO: It's helpful that, Karl Nurse, the council chair lives in our neighborhood, and Darden Rice, who is new to the city council owns property and used to live in our neighborhood. We also have a CONA (Council of Neighborhood Associations) rep, and we interact with the city through that.

What do you see as being the future for neighborhoods in this city?

PO: I feel that Mayor Foster was out of touch with the city as it is now. I am hoping that new mayor, brings back community policing, as well as grants and other such things.

What is the best way for a person to get involved in their neighborhood?

PO: The best way is to show up and get involved even when nothing major is occurring.

Individual Reflection

This civic awareness assignment has brought me closer to an issue I care deeply about, the issue of neighborhood involvement. I have been in touch with neighborhood representatives all over the city. I have had the wonderful opportunity to get to know the people and neighborhoods of St. Petersburg a little better. However, the more I have worked on this assignment, the more I have become convinced of two things. First, neighborhoods absolutely do matter. This can be in the sense of crime prevention, city government, or just social relationships, but I believe that good neighborhoods are the building blocks of strong cities. Second, I believe that people need to be positively involved with their neighborhood associations, such as they are. I believe that not only is it good for the neighborhood and city, but for the individual as well.