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Midlands Voices: Community development needs to prioritize people
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Omaha is working hard to solve some big community and economic development challenges. The question is, "Can we make 'community' central to Omaha's community development?"

Answering this question requires that we answer a related question, "Why do we spend so little of Omaha's community development resources on nurturing and building community between people?"

Physical development - involving homes, apartments, stores, offices, streetscapes, infrastructure and public facilities - is important, but so is what I like to call people-building. Think of this type of community development as building from the inside-out.

Here are some community-building efforts that are showing early signs of significant potential to build up people and improve our community's development:

- *Orchard Hill community advocate.* The Mammel Foundation is supporting a part-time advocate to help build community in the Orchard Hill neighborhood. The goal is to make the neighborhood more sustainable by making homes healthier and more energy-efficient.

This person is supported, in turn, by a community of Omaha-area organizations working together as the Omaha Healthy Homes Partnership. The City of Omaha recently added some funding to this pilot project.

Hopefully, this can lead to more people-building partnerships for community development.

- *Neighbors United/Mosaic Community Development.* Over the past year, Mosaic Community Development - a small, faith-based organization that focuses on community- and coalition-building - has been working with 15 different faith communities in the Park Avenue area.

Now called Neighbors United, the faith community worked for six months to identify food insecurity and building community among residents as the area's primary needs. These needs stand in stark contrast to the priorities identified in a redevelopment plan crafted for the same area in 2007 and 2008. Not surprisingly, the redevelopment plan emphasizes physical development.

Since September 2008, Mosaic Community Development has guided Neighbors United in offering a home-cooked meal and community-building program every Saturday at First Baptist Church. Thus far, more than 150 volunteers have provided 4,370 meals during the first seven

months. Friendships are being forged, connections are being made, and hope is being restored for some of the guests.

It is appropriate to circle back to a slightly revised version of the original question. "What must be done to make community central to Omaha's community development?"

First, we need to fund people-building initiatives at a far higher level than is now the practice in Omaha. This will either require growing the size of the pie allocated for community development in Omaha or reallocating current funds.

Absent additional funds from government or philanthropy, there are still options for Omaha to reinvent its approach to community development.

Starting in 2004, Portland, Ore., began focusing its Community Development Block Grant resources on helping people, not on helping improve specific geographic places or neighborhoods. The goal is to raise the incomes of people assisted with CDBG funds by 25 percent within three years. A comprehensive approach is taken with each person.

Compared with Portland, Omaha has a long way to go. Omaha's 2008 CDBG funds were allocated almost totally to brick- and-mortar projects and necessary administrative costs. Only about 5 percent of \$6.2 million in CDBG funds went to what could be considered people-building efforts.

Second, Omaha needs to significantly increase the number and capacity of community-based nonprofits. The Omaha Community Foundation called for this action some 10 years ago.

A review of data provided by the National Center for Charitable Statistics shows that in December 2008, Omaha had a total of 29 nonprofit organizations working in the domain of community, neighborhood development and improvement. Of these, 12 were large enough to be required to file IRS form 990 (\$25,000 in annual revenues). This number is but a fraction of the nonprofit base found in communities such as Des Moines (24); Kansas City (47); Milwaukee (46); and Portland (36).

To summarize, many Omaha residents are working to confront significant issues such as poverty, high school dropout rates, underemployment and unemployment and homelessness. Let's ensure that we achieve even more in the future by refocusing our definition of community development to prioritize the building up of people.

Let's make community central to Omaha!