MEMORANDUM

Date: May 6, 2011

From: Robert Thompson and Stacy Sorenson (NCR staff)

To: NCEC Commissioners

Cc: David Rubedor (Director, NCR)

Re: Initial Findings from April 2011 Focus Groups

Attachment: Consolidated Notes Final. xls

SUMMARY

During April, 2011, members of the City of Minneapolis' Neighborhood and Community Engagement Commission (NCEC) and staff from the City's Department of Neighborhood and Community Relations (NCR) held 5 focus groups to gather input from neighborhood organizations on how programs, including the Community Participation Program (CPP), the Neighborhood Investment Fund and the Community Innovation Fund, should be implemented moving forward with an emphasis on mitigating equity issues among neighborhoods related to the suspension of new NRP contracts. This report provides background on the process, and summarizes the findings on pages 1 to 7. Appendixes x to y show comments categorized by theme as they relate to the implementation of these programs.

BACKGROUND

On December 13, 2010, the City Council, as part of its action on the 2011 budget, froze a portion of Phase II NRP funds, and gave the following Staff Direction to the Neighborhood and Community Relations Department:

> *(3) Direct NCR to work with the NCEC and report back to City Council by March 1, 2011, on how programs, including the Neighborhood Investment Fund and the Community Innovation Fund, will be implemented moving forward with an emphasis on mitigating equity issues among neighborhoods related to the suspension of new contracts.*

In early March, following direction from the Neighborhood and Community Engagement Commission, NCR reported to the City Council, proposing that NCR and the NCEC would consult with neighborhood organizations prior to developing recommendations for the City Council. These recommendations may result in changes to the Guidelines for the Community Participation Program, as well as other proposed neighborhood funding programs.

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Following the recommendations of the NCEC, Minneapolis NCR staff and NCEC Commissioners convened four focus groups, one in each quadrant of the city. Additionally, a separate pilot focus group was held, and neighborhood residents were invited to submit written comments. All totaled, 29 residents from 12 neighborhoods attended these sessions. No written comments were received.

METHODOLOGY

NCR staff made individual phone calls and sent emails inviting neighborhood leaders to attend one of four focus groups in late April, 2011. An invitation was also extended to neighborhood organizations to participate in a pilot focus group on April 12, 2011 to assist the NCR and the NCEC with finalizing the agenda. This information, along with relevant background information, was also posted to the NCR website.

A set of three guiding questions was provided to participants of the late April focus groups meeting to help facilitate and focus the discussion:

1. *What will your organization do differently as a result of the December City Council action?*
2. *How would you want us to redesign neighborhood funding programs such as the Community Participation Program, to address these disparities? For example, we could change the formula for allocating funds to neighborhoods; we could have a single funding program; neighborhoods could use Community Participation Program funds to fund NRP projects, etc. Other ideas?*
3. *Could you give us an example from the last year of engagement with a City department where you would liked to have had greater impact on the department's priorities or budgets? What would that look like?*

During these sessions, NCR staff would occasionally ask clarifying or following up questions as well. Comments were captured on laptop computers by a second NCR staff. Minor edits were made for clarity, and comments were posted to the NCR website within a few days of each session.

Comments were then consolidated into a single spreadsheet, including the source, the guiding question, and the order in which the comment was made. In order to identify overall themes and messages, each individual comment was then reviewed and categorized. As with past reports, it should be noted that this categorization is somewhat subjective, and is based on the "best guess" of NCR staff of how the comment relates to other comments, and are not set in concrete.

Organization of Comments

The comments are organized by source (focus group session); order of comments provided; guiding question; and category (e.g. City, Funding allocations, Neighborhood

response, etc). The spreadsheet can be sorted or filtered using dropdown menus in the header row. The categories include:

- **City:** Comments about the workings of specific City departments -- distinct from elected officials or community engagement activities.
- **Clarifications:** Questions and answers – generally about the proposed programs, the funding process, the NCR and the NCEC.
- **Community Engagement:** Comments about how City leaders and residents interact with each other.
- **Funding Allocations:** Comments about the Community Participation Program (CPP), the Neighborhood Investment Fund (NIF) and the Community Incentive Fund (CIF) – specifically the funding levels and which groups should be able to access the funds.
- **Neighborhood Activities:** Comments about current goals and activities of neighborhood organizations.
- **Neighborhood Characteristics:** Comments which describe the neighborhood or neighborhood organization.
- **Neighborhood Response:** Comments describing the approach taken by neighborhood organizations as a result of the December City Council actions.
- **Other:** Comments, which do not fit neatly with other categories.
- **Outside Funding:** Comments regarding efforts to secure funding from sources other than local government.
- **Process:** Comments about the development, implementation and refinement of the Community Participation Program and other funding programs administered by the NCR.
- **Scale / Timing:** Comments about the level at which planning and activities should take place and when these activities should occur in order to yield the best results.
- **Services:** Suggestions about assistance or services that should be provided to neighborhood organizations by the City or by NCR.
- **Use of Funds:** Comments about how neighborhoods should be able to use CPP, NIF, CIF or remaining funds.

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SUMMARY OF FINDINGS:

A. Neighborhood organization interactions with the City are mixed.

1. Frustration with City Council's December 2010 actions: Participants expressed frustration with elected officials about the actions taken in December to freeze access to NRP funds. This sentiment permeated each focus group session. Nearly every participant cited either the exact dollar amount or the percentage of their NRP plan allocation that had been lost. Even more than the actual Council actions however, participants seemed disappointed by the process in which the decision was made, noting that it appeared to violate the City's adopted Community

Engagement Principals. Participants also expressly indicated that they understood that the City faces difficult financial decisions, but were still upset with the results.

2. Need for results and accountability: It was noted that elected officials often seem more enamored with processes (such as these focus groups) than with results. The 311 system was repeatedly identified as an exception to this trend, although it was also stated that 311 is complaint-driven and isn't a magic bullet.

3. Engage citizens – but don't over-engage them: Several participants described themselves and their organizations as "willing partners" of the City and detailed the steps they've taken to familiarize their neighborhood boards with the new department, the new commission, and the new programs. That said, participants also expressed a need for the City to use their time appropriately. It was noted that residents will get involved in issues that they care about, but that when, for example, they contribute their time to developing a plan, then they expect that plan to be honored. Participants stressed that they don't want to micromanage City departments, that they don't need to know every detail, and that they haven't the time to scour City department websites. "Just give me a phone number" was a sentiment that was often expressed.

4. General support for City departments: While focus group participants had mixed reviews of their elected officials, they expressed general support for the work of City departments. Areas where other departments could improve were noted, but several departments and individual staff were lauded for their efforts. There was a desire expressed by some participants to learn more about the department budgets and especially department priorities. Participants were asked about ways in which neighborhood priorities could be better integrated into department budgets and work plans, but few ideas were offered. This seems to be an approach that deserves further exploration.

See "Appendix x: Comments regarding Community Engagement" and Appendix x: Comments regarding the City"

B. 2012-2013 funding for neighborhoods should be fine-tuned, but not reformulated.

1. Recalibrate the allocation formula, but don't start over: Although there were many questions about the formula used to determine 2010 CPP allocations, participants indicated general satisfaction with the existing formula. Staff was implored to heed the recommendations provided in the Summer 2010 Listening Sessions, and to not repeat the process. Participants did point to the newly available 2010 Census data as information that should be incorporated into the current formula and feed minor adjustments to neighborhood CPP allocations.

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2. Continue needs-based funding: Participants were in wide agreement that neighborhoods with greater needs should receive more funding. The current formula largely relies on needs-based data, and participants indicated continued and in some cases, increased support for this approach.

3. Outside funding for neighborhood organizations is limited: Participants noted the difficulty of relying on outside funding, particularly given the current economic and political climates. It was made clear that not every neighborhood has the "right demographics" or the "sexy issue" needed to secure outside funding, and that the prospect of having over 50 neighborhood organizations competing for the same funds was not a good one.

4. Simplify bureaucratic processes: Numerous questions were asked about how the programs will work in practice. All participants requested that, wherever possible, processes be clarified and simplified. It was noted that neighborhood needs change over time, and that the programs should be easily adaptable to meet those needs. The NRP Plan Modification process was explicitly named as a process that should not be replicated.

5. Support wider funding for neighborhood–identified projects: The majority of participants urged that the current program guidelines should be expanded to include funding for projects as well as for community engagement. It was noted that projects bring people in, and that without project funding, only the "usual suspects" will be at the table. Some participants added that spending all the funds on management without specific projects is a questionable practice.

See "Appendix x: Comments regarding Funding Allocations", "Appendix x: Comments regarding Neighborhood Characteristics", "Appendix x: Comments regarding Outside Funding" "Appendix x: Comments regarding Process" and Appendix x: Comments regarding Use of Funds"

C. Neighborhoods support local control, but are concerned about the well-being of all neighborhoods.

1. Make neighborhood priorities City priorities: Participants repeatedly called for a "bottom up" versus a "top down" approach to priority setting in the city. The "Great Streets" program was offered as a program that was too "top down", and some participants stated that they thought that the CPP was "top down" as well. Participants questioned why neighborhood priorities are not additionally city priorities. It was also stated that only those who live in the neighborhood can fully understand what the neighborhood needs.

2. Recognize that not all neighborhoods have the same access to resources: While participants were knowledgeable about and ready to promote the unique qualities of their own neighborhood, they also urged consideration for other

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neighborhoods. Particular concern was expressed both for neighborhoods with higher needs and also for neighborhoods (of all income levels) that lack the organizational capacity to weather the current political storms.

See "Appendix x: Comments regarding Funding Allocations", Appendix x: Comments regarding Neighborhood Characteristics" and "Appendix x: Comments regarding Process". (also CE?)

D. Neighborhoods recognize that these challenges also bring opportunities.

1. Now is a time to re-evaluate: Participants explained that the City Council's actions forced them out of their comfort zones and have caused them to re-evaluate both their operations and their priorities. While still frustrated with the Council, they generally view this as a good problem. One group noted that while they're not in a position to lead, they're still strongly positioned to support projects. Several discussed how they're taking steps to make their organizations less reliant on staff.

2. Services should be made available to neighborhoods: It was widely agreed that many neighborhoods would benefit from services that could be provided by the City or by NCR. Commonly suggested services include help with grant writing and with communications. Some participants added that now is also a good time to provide tailored assistance to underperforming neighborhoods.

3. Efforts must be appropriately scaled – both "right sized" and made at the right point in time: It was noted that some efforts are either inefficient or never reach their full potential because the scale is inappropriate or they're undertaken at the wrong time. Some participants questioned the efficiency of having every neighborhood create and oversee their own housing programs. Similarly, in every session participants shared experiences of completed plans that now sit on the shelf – always to the chagrin of the volunteers who were involved. While there are many reasons why some plans are never implemented, there are also cases where plans are recreated 5-10 years later when the timing is right -- and then are finally implemented.

4. Collaboration is more important than ever: Several participants told of discussions they've had exploring partnerships with other neighborhoods and non-profit organizations and of increased efforts towards collaboration. This seems to be a melding of their desires for local control and the need for increased efficiency.

See "Appendix x: Comments regarding Neighborhood Response", "Appendix x: Comments regarding Scale / Timing" and "Appendix x: Comments regarding Services".

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E. Communications could be improved.

1. Expectations must be clear and realistic: While this is an important component of Community Engagement, it bears repeating, and was also brought up repeatedly during the focus group sessions.

2. Neighborhood organizations would like to see NCEC Commissioners at their neighborhood meetings: Commissioners' attendance was viewed as variable. While there appears to be some sensitivity to Commissioners arriving uninvited, focus group participants seemed to be nearly universal in welcoming occasional visits.

3. There is a need for greater clarity about the Community Participation Program: In every focus group session, participants asked for clarification about one point or another about the CPP or the planned additional programs. Participants further warned about a possible whiplash effect during what has already been a tumultuous year.

See "Appendix x: Comments regarding Community Engagement" and "Appendix x: Comments regarding Clarifications".

CONCLUSIONS:

While the number of focus group attendees was not large, the 374 comments that were logged seem to be in general agreement with the comments provided during last summer's listening sessions. Further, participants appear to be fairly typical of neighborhood volunteers who have invested their time in working with their neighborhood organization on projects with City and NRP staff. Noting these caveats, NCR staff offers three possible conclusions for the NCEC's initial consideration:

1. Major changes to the Community Participation Program formula are both unnecessary and unwanted

2. Guidelines should be expanded to allow funds to be used for project implementation, as well as for community participation activities.

3. Engage – but don't over-engage residents. Just because it's important to us, doesn't mean that it's important to them

4. There should be increased communication from both the NCEC and the NCR.

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