

Neighbor Power: Building Community the Seattle Way

Judith van Praag

In University Press's "Neighbor Power: Building Community the Seattle Way" Jim Diers relates the history and programs of the Seattle Department of Neighborhoods. In ten chapters the author explains the value of community, how to involve and connect neighbors, service centers and district councils. A multitude of success stories, and examples of programs such as the Neighborhood Matching Fund and P-Patch (community gardening) are illustrated with photographs of public art, gardens, parks, and people in the community.

The author argues for bottom-up approach to neighborhood planning and in doing so clarifies the Neighborhood Matching Fund as a powerful ally and tool. Highlighting history, plans and progress in Columbia City, Diers shows how goals, mechanics, and outcomes of the Department's different programs interact in one particular neighborhood. For those in other cities who can't see how they could replicate Seattle's programs, he offers alternatives, suggestions and examples of cities where parts of neighborhood programs were effectively used.

Not mentioned in the book is how much interest Seattle's Community Building programs evoke in Japan. Soichiro Maeyama, professor of business at Hachinohe University wrote a book inspired by the Seattle experience titled: American Community Autonomy. Yuko Nishimura, professor of anthropology at Komozawa University, Tokyo, wrote "Kusa no Ne NPO no Machizukuri-Shiatoru kara no Chousen" (Town Development by Grassroots NPOs—The Challenge from Seattle).

Those who know Jim Diers (and who in Seattle doesn't – this is a man who often literally lends his hand to community projects, painting murals, turning compost) will recognize his speaking voice in his writing. Open and accepting of others, his aim is to understand and be understood. He makes what could be dry fudder (city government-ese) read like an appealingly easy recipe for a wholesome dish (or a hot compost).

Organizers will find guidance in this "Community Building

101", written by a true leader in the(ir) field (Diers started his career in Seattle in 1976, as organizer, and was the first – and for many regrettably former– director of the department). Particularly useful are program details throughout the book and an appendix with Neighborhood Matching Fund Guidelines. Students and academicians will be thankful for the included bibliography.

The author mentions that the stories and photographs in "Neighbor Power" are for Mayor Schell. In a similar vein, I would like to suggest that this "album" –for the former City Father– will be of value to thousands of Seattle's citizens, to you, to me. After all, these stories, or reports –on innovative, community-driven plans, projects, and gardens, which came to fruition thanks to people in the neighborhoods– are part of our communal heritage.

Jim Dier said: "My intent is to inspire more citizens to action and to encourage government officials to see empowered communities, not as a threat, but as a tremendous asset."

Readers in the International District will remember how community members played a role in the formation of the Downtown District Council, some may have been personally involved in that, or with Helping Link, with neighborhood projects (i.e. Charlie Chong) or are key people in the Department of Neighborhoods (i.e. Ron Angeles, Bernie Matsuno. In "Neighbor Power" their work is acknowledged and remembered.

Think, "Hillside Gardens at Martin Luther King Way Jr. and McLellan" or "Eliseo Silva's Carlos Bulosan mural at the Eastern Hotel". Think "Dragon Pole" or "Sadako Sasaki's Peace Park". These are just a few of the examples mentioned in "Neighbor Power". "A neighborhood is not the same as a community," writes Diers. "A neighborhood is a geographic area that people share, while a community is a group of people who identify with and support one another ... Strong communities are those that rely on their own resources, including assets that each and every person possesses."

Diers' success stories include the Cultivating Communities Program (founded by Friends of P-Patch in 1995) which involved Southeast Asian immigrants/ refugees and the Seattle Housing

Authority. Today 17 gardens are used exclusively by public housing residents and virtually all gardeners are from Southeast Asia and East Africa. "Neighbor Power" is a book I would recommend to readers here and all over the world. People who criticize politics. People I've always had to explain to how differently the local government in the US operates. People who are in awe when they hear about Helping-/ Lettuce Links and thousands of organic gardeners who grow tons of vegetables for the local food banks, and so on and so forth.

Whether you're a budding activist or organizer, whether you're an old hand or a new gardener, "Neighbor Power" could be the text book you've been waiting for.

Neighbor Power: Building Community the Seattle Way by Jim Diers.
University of Washington Press, 176 p., ISBN 0-295-98444-9
\$18.95

Previously published on 1/19/2005 in the International Examiner.
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