

Jim Diers – Workshop Theme

Activists and Bureaucrats: Transforming Adversaries into Partners (Speech or Workshop)

In a democracy, it is unfortunate that many neighbourhood activists think of government as the enemy and that government officials often perceive activists to be a nuisance or a threat. That thinking can change when both government and activists realize that neighborhoods are not simply places with needs but also communities of people with tremendous untapped resources. Mutually beneficial partnerships are possible when government moves beyond processes of citizen participation to programs of community empowerment.

Over the past 30 years, Jim Diers has battled government as a community organizer and worked for government as director of Seattle's Department of Neighborhoods. Jim will describe the City of Seattle's programs of community empowerment and how neighbourhood organizations have utilized them to newly involve tens of thousands of residents, including many who had been marginalized. He will share stories about the remarkable plans and projects that have resulted, accomplishments that neither activists nor government could have achieved on their own. Jim will also talk about the growing neighbourhood movement that he has witnessed as he has traveled globally with his new book, "Neighbor Power: Building Community the Seattle Way."

This topic could be covered in a speech or it could consist of a half to full day workshop discussing how to implement programs such as Involving All Neighbors, Neighborhood Matching Fund, Small Sparks, Neighbor Appreciation Day, community driven planning, little city halls, district councils, community gardens, and leadership development.

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The Art of Public Safety, Economic Development, Youth Empowerment, and Community Building

In the hands of the community, art can be a powerful force. Jim Diers will use slides and stories to illustrate how communities can utilize art to achieve a wide variety of goals that have often proven elusive with more traditional approaches.

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Sustainability Begins with Community

The world is too crowded for me's. There's only room for we's. When people begin to identify as members of a community, they care for one another and the place they share. They think in terms of the past and the future as well as the present.

Communities are also more self-sufficient and less reliant on outside resources. "Meeting present needs without jeopardizing future resources" is not only a common definition of sustainability; it is the goal of empowered communities.

Jim Diers will describe strategies for building a strong sense of community. He will also share stories of ways in which empowered communities are working to make the world more sustainable.

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Planning By and For the People

For many community activists, a plan is nothing more than a four letter word. Planning is something done to and not with communities. Because there is no broad ownership or even understanding of the resulting document, it often just sits on the shelf.

Jim Diers will describe how bottom-up planning can lead to results embraced by government and communities. In Seattle, communities were empowered to hire their own planners and to define their own scope of work. The communities, in turn, contributed their unique knowledge, perspective, and expertise. Their vision tended to be more holistic and recommendations more innovative than those of the bureaucracy. 38 neighbourhood plans resulted from the participation of 30,000 people. Broad ownership held government accountable for implementation. More importantly, the community took responsibility for much of the implementation themselves; they even voted to tax themselves an additional \$470 million for new and improved libraries, community centers, and parks as recommended in their plans. Democracy works!

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Enhancing Safety by Empowering Communities

Safe neighbourhoods tend to be places where people know and support one another. Seattle city government has helped neighbours build a stronger sense of community by facilitating more than 3000 neighbourhood self-help projects. These projects, including community gardens, murals, a revitalized business district, an Eritrean community center, and a gigantic troll have contributed to safer neighbourhoods while newly engaging tens of thousands of people in their communities and with their government. The new paradigm calls on city government and citizens alike to view neighbourhoods not simply as places with needs but as communities of caring people whose assets are underutilized. Thanks to programs of community empowerment developed by Seattle and other cities, residents are now taking responsibility for the livability of their neighbourhoods.

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Workshop on Mapping and Mobilizing Community Assets

The traditional approach to community development is to begin by conducting a needs assessment. Once a neighborhood's deficiencies have been documented, outside resources are identified to "help" that community. Not only does such an approach foster dependency, but it fails to take advantage of the abundant resources that are present in every community and every individual.

An alternate approach is to build community from the inside out. This approach starts by mapping the neighborhood's resources. The workshop will guide participants in identifying their community's assets including residents, community organizations, agencies, natural and physical resources, and the local economy. Workshop participants will learn a variety of strategies for mobilizing these assets to build their communities both socially and physically.

This workshop can be tailored so that it is appropriate for community organizations or for universities, government, and other agencies. The length of the workshop can be anywhere from two hours to a full day.