



NEIGHBORHOOD REVITALIZATION ZONE ADVISORY BOARD MINUTES OF MEETING

March 26, 2013

The Neighborhood Revitalization Advisory Board held a meeting on Tuesday, March 26, 2013, 10:00 AM, at the Connecticut Room, [Central CT State University](#), 1615 Stanley St, New Britain.

Board Members or Designees Present:

W. David LeVasseur, [OPM](#); Chair
Mark Aschenbach, [DPH](#)
Tim Beeble, [City of Stamford](#)
Thomas Clarke, II, [City of Hartford](#)
Gail Coppage, [CT State Colleges & Univ.](#)
Steve Dombrowski, [DOL](#)

Roxane Fromson, [DOT](#)
Bob Hannon, [DEEP](#)
Margaret Malinowski, [City of New Britain](#)
Samuel Shaw, [City of Bridgeport](#)
Ted Steege, [Hartford 2000](#)

Speakers:

Brigitte Brown, [City of New Britain](#)
Andrew Clarke, [CCSU – IMRP](#)
Steve Kliger, [CCSU – CPPSR](#)
Margaret Malinowski (also board member)

Barbara McGrath, [UConn – CULI](#)
Hon. Tim O'Brien, [Mayor of New Britain](#)
Sheldon Watson, [CCSU](#)

Others Present:

David Morin, [Parkville NRZ](#), Hartford
Bennett Nocera, [City of New Britain](#)

John Pasco, [CCSU – CPPSR](#)
Bruce Wittchen, [OPM](#)

1. Welcome, Introductions, Adoption of Minutes

David LeVasseur, Chair of the [Neighborhood Revitalization Zone](#) (NRZ) Advisory Board, called the meeting to order and said he would change the order of the agenda a little. He introduced [New Britain Mayor](#) Tim O'Brien, who thanked everyone for attending this meeting. Mayor O'Brien added that NRZs are at the core of the city's effort to blend community organizing and planning to foster new possibilities.

David LeVasseur introduced Steve Kliger, who welcomed everyone to the meeting on behalf of the President of CCSU. He described the [Center for Public Policy & Social Research](#) and described the services it provides. He noted that the Center provides training for the state's municipal clerks, zoning enforcement officers and wetlands officials. He said the Center's program evaluation services are unique and that program evaluation is integral to the operation of every organization, including NRZs.

A motion was made and seconded to accept the [minutes of the October 15, 2010 meeting](#) and they were approved by voice vote.

2. NRZs in New Britain

Dave LeVasseur introduced Brigitte Brown, the [City of New Britain's](#) Community Organizer. Brigitte said the city has three active NRZs and a 4th is coming to together. Her role has been to assess and connect with the NRZs and neighborhoods. She noted

that the city's Arch St neighborhood does not have an organized NRZ, but people are working together and one activity is a neighborhood cleanup.

Brigitte said NRZs begin with goals, but interest declines if they succeed with those goals without establishing new ones. The mayor is very supportive of the city's neighborhood efforts. She described NRZ neighborhood projects including the Willow Street Park, on a former housing project site, and community gardens in another NRZ. Projects like these help people develop a sense of pride about their neighborhood and become vested in the success of their neighborhood.

3. Panel Discussion

David LeVasseur asked Bruce Wittchen to introduce the panel discussion. Bruce said the topic of NRZ governance was selected because the wide range of questions he hears about NRZs tend to focus on one or more aspects of governance. Each of the presenters has a strong background and it should be a very informative discussion.

David LeVasseur said we will change the order of presenters and asked that questions be held until the end. He introduced Margaret Malinowski, Neighborhood Preservation Program Administrator with [New Britain's Department of Municipal Development](#), and said she has long experience with the NRZ program.

Margaret Malinowski said New Britain has been active since the beginning of the program and noted that Vice President Gore twice visited the city in the 1990s because of the city's revitalization efforts. The federal government recognized that a top-down approach was not working and signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the state pledging federal support for neighborhood revitalization programs. The purpose of this MOU was to encourage and facilitate cooperation among federal, state and local governments; non-profit organizations and the private sector to promote economic development and neighborhood revitalization.

The recession and job losses of the caused the state to rethink the way it supports community development and neighborhood revitalization. This led to the passage of [Public Act 95-340](#), which created the [NRZ statutes](#) and empowered residents and others to be part of the decision making and planning process in their neighborhoods. Margaret said the NRZ statutes gave people the power to change their neighborhoods.

Margaret described how a group creates an NRZ, including defining boundaries and writing bylaws and the NRZ plan. Antonia Moran, formerly of CCSU's Center for Social Research had been the best ally in the city's NRZ's efforts. CCSU's role was important and not just because of its financial resources, but also because of the credibility a university's involvement can provide.

Margaret Malinowski said everything came together within the Broad St. NRZ, which received a large grant for rehabilitation and demolition work. She described ways in which city staff have worked with NRZs over the years. Margaret also mentioned that federal money was used to create a park, with community input, on a former public housing site in a neighborhood with lots of children but few recreation opportunities. Due to resident input, furthermore, the city set up police substations in neighborhoods with high crime statistics.

Now we are in another recession and funding is not the same. Margaret said we need access to other resources and NRZs and their cities have to partner with others. Universities can help not only with direct funding but also with grant writing.

David LeVasseur introduced Andrew Clark, who is Director of the [Institute for Municipal and Regional Policy](#) at CCSU. Andrew said he has a background with the NRZ in Hartford's Asylum Hill neighborhood and worked with Barbara McGrath, the next speaker, in writing bylaws back in 2004. He said NRZs have certainly been created with noble intentions and have the capacity to do good.

The [Asylum Hill NRZ](#) is primarily made up of neighborhood homeowners and recently had to replace its longtime leader. They have to renew their strategic plan and some members wanted to bring in disenfranchised potential members – residents of neighborhood apartments – but others disagreed. The city does not have the staff capacity to go to the neighborhood, so only hears from NRZ leaders. He noted that corporations are represented in NRZs by professional staff who know how to make things happen to their liking.

Andrew said NRZs can be a voice for the neighborhood, but asked whose voice are they. NRZs need a structure and he thinks the state NRZ advisory board can help provide that structure. We should also look at how NRZs are treated by government and others with power.

David LeVasseur introduced Barbara McGrath, who is with the [CT Urban Legal Initiative](#) at UConn Law School and has worked with a number of NRZs. Barbara said she has done a lot of work with NRZs in Hartford as well as some in New Britain and New Haven. She added that she had worked with Nick Carbone on the original statutes

Barbara said one of the most important things for NRZs to do is to incorporate because, lacking that status, they are not an entity and members face liability concerns. This is not a problem for NRZ planning, but it becomes a problem when implementing the plan. She pointed out that an NRZ benefits from the involvement of a broad group of people but, as it becomes a more formal organization, it can lose its inclusiveness.

The structure of an NRZ is different from the usual corporate structure. An NRZ should have broad input and operate by building a consensus, but Barbara pointed out that consensus building is difficult. She noted that consensus does not mean unanimous.

Barbara described NRZ activities and said many people want to focus on education and economic development, which were not considered part of the original NRZ mission, which focused on anti-blight efforts. She mentioned the balance between a formal leadership structure and inclusiveness and noted that including more people in decision-making results in a slower process.

Barbara spoke of one NRZ she knew of that had a leadership conflict and secret meeting. The details of public notice rules are important and there must be a list of NRZ members. She mentioned an NRZ that had 150 new members attend a meeting to vote to approve a new CVS in the neighborhood. Specific responsibilities should accompany being a member or leader and she knows one NRZ leader who doesn't hold meetings.

An NRZ's bylaws should be comparable to a non-stock corporation's bylaws. Bylaws should specify voting procedures – will a vote be by the board or by the members? Most should be by the members, except for specific instances, such as the signing of a contract. Municipalities should explore how they can encourage NRZs to do these things with a strong but flexible governance structure.

Dave LeVasseur introduced Sheldon Watson, an Associate Professor in CCSU's [Department of Educational Leadership](#), who has a strong interest in program evaluation of nonprofit organizations. Sheldon said he is new to NRZs, but listening to the morning's speakers has had him exploding with ideas. These are not unique concerns; public education faces the same issues of control, funding, organizational evaluation and capacity development.

Sheldon Watson said the goal of program evaluation is to obtain information, but noted that the process can appear to be judgmental. He believes there are many potential linkages with universities, which deal with learning, information, structure, and leadership development. Those are what educational institutions do and partnering institutions of higher education will allow NRZs to develop important connections and relationships.

People have noble intentions in volunteering for community organizations, but many lack the background necessary for what they hope to do. Linkages with schools can help and such linkages can be resilient and enduring. Schools want to reach out to their community because we are all in this together. He pointed out that CCSU actively tries to reach out, but a university can appear to be isolated in its ivory towers.

Money is short now, but universities' missions include community service and they might be able to offer valuable services at little or no cost. He mentioned faculty members obligations for community service and noted he has helped organizations with leadership development, helping to create the governance structure.

Program evaluators want to come in at the beginning, not at the end, and described the general process of program evaluation. The design of an evaluation must serve an organization's specific needs and the process is grounded in effective communication. An evaluation must be well-designed, executed, analyzed and communicated. NRZs can have an impact on many things and an evaluator must listen and use appropriate quantitative and qualitative information.

Evaluation requires observation, collaboration and honesty. An evaluator might want to only tell the good part of the story, but cannot do that. An evaluator should be tuned into the needs of the most vulnerable population – this is a moral issue. A corporation can have good intentions for its participation in an NRZ, but its focus might not be on the most vulnerable.

Sometimes you can only do a little in an evaluation and sometimes you can do a lot. It is important to recognize that it will not be possible to assess all potential impacts right away; some are long-term. Given that, the best approach is for the evaluation to be a long-term relationship between the organization and evaluator. Establishing such a relationship with an institution of higher education is a good approach.

Dave LeVasseur invited questions from the audience and Robert Hannon asked about the relationship between Hartford NRZs and various municipal boards and commissions. Andrew Clark said there was not a formal relationship during the period he was most involved with an NRZ, but noted that had been during a previous city administration. In his experience, a commission would act and an NRZ would react. Ted Steege said some of the city's NRZs are more closely involved in the city's actions and asked Barbara McGrath what can be done to foster that relationship.

Barbara McGrath said there must be a clear expectation that an NRZ will publicize its meeting schedule and post meeting minutes and other documents to show what it is doing. She mentioned an instance where one faction in an NRZ claimed the NRZ had

voted in favor of something while another faction said the NRZ had voted against it. It might be necessary to enforce an NRZ's bylaws to ensure proper procedures are followed, but that must be done with care. An NRZ gains its credibility by showing that it represents the community with a clear structure.

Margaret Malinowski said New Britain does not have a formal system for involving NRZs in municipal decisions, but described a recent situation in which an NRZ provided a forum for considering the redevelopment of a former school building. People were not comfortable with the proposal and residents and business owners will come out for their NRZ meetings.

Sam Shaw said the size of an NRZ has an effect on how it functions. He said an NRZ that is too large in area will have orphans on its periphery – people and areas that are disenfranchised. In a large NRZ, meeting locations should be moved around to foster inclusiveness. A more modest sized NRZ including an institution such as a hospital is better.

Andrew Clark explained that Hartford's NRZs are based on the city's previously identified framework of neighborhoods, but said people who are not actively involved in their NRZ might only learn of something at the end of the approval process. There should be a better process for outreach. He does not know if that problem results from the size of the NRZ's or inadequate inclusiveness. It certainly would not be beneficial to have many small NRZs.

Sam Shaw said problems can arise when an NRZ crosses multiple council districts because it can be more difficult to coordinate municipal and NRZ interests. Barbara McGrath said Hartford 2000 has been a good structure for finding common interests. She agreed that people can feel less connected if an NRZ is too large.

4. ADJOURNMENT

Dave LeVasseur said the discussion will have to end there to free the room for others and said it has been a very worthwhile discussion. The meeting was adjourned at 11:40.