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Community Building, Community Bridging: Linking Neighborhood Improvement Initiatives and the New Regionalism in the San Francisco Bay Area

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Linking Neighborhood Improvement Initiatives and the New Regionalism in the San Francisco Bay Area

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Community Building, Community Bridging

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The basic notion of comprehensive community initiatives is to go beyond the “bricks and mortar” and instead focus on community vision, community-building, and community action

Introduction

In recent years, the field of community development has undergone dramatic change. Comprehensive community initiatives have emerged that attempt to work across policy silos and integrate strategies in the realms of housing, employment, and health. Community organizing has resurfaced as a core element of neighborhood improvement, helping to strengthen social fabric and create new types of partnerships for underserved urban areas. Development itself has been redefined, with gentrification and displacement more carefully distinguished from real gains in earnings and assets for local residents.

Another key trend has been a growing interest in “thinking and linking” to the region. Advocates increasingly argue that many problems affecting neighborhoods, including the departure of jobs, shortfalls in housing, and gaps in transportation, are influenced by regional decisions. While they do not suggest that everything can be solved at a regional level, they stress that the region is a ripe arena for action and that regional organizing can be a useful lever for affecting neighborhood outcomes.

In Milwaukee, for example, labor and community groups came together across the region to pass a living wage ordinance, and redirect transportation funds to link central city workers to suburban job opportunities. In the Delaware Valley around Philadelphia, community leaders developed a regional Reinvestment Fund to finance affordable housing, community service, and workforce development programs in the region. In Los Angeles, churches, labor and community organizations joined together to insure that the expansion of a regional attraction, the Staples Convention Center, would include \$1 million worth of parks improvement, \$100,000 in seed funding to create community-based job training, and the construction of 160 affordable housing units in the adjacent neighborhood, one of the poorest areas in the City.

The lessons about making the local-regional link have been driven home in the San Francisco Bay Area as well. In 2000, for example, resi-

dents in the Mayfair neighborhood of San Jose tried a new approach to an old problem: lack of access to health insurance for large numbers of poor and immigrant children. As part of its own comprehensive community initiative, Mayfair had organized health *promotoras* to go door to door, and provide residents with information on primary health care and local clinics. While these efforts improved the utilization of public health services, they did little to expand coverage to those not designated under existing state programs, especially children lacking immigration documentation.

Taking a different tack, Mayfair leaders teamed up with Working Partnerships, a labor-based research and advocacy group, and People Acting in Community Together (PACT), an organization made up of 13 faith-based congregations, to lobby Santa Clara County and the City of San Jose to use tobacco settlement funds to provide health coverage of all the County’s low income children. Building on strong networks forged in the *promotoras* work, Mayfair leaders worked closely with their partners to develop the campaign, mobilize residents, and ensure effective implementation of the program in their neighborhood. The results of tying together local organizing and regional resources through this “Children’s Health Initiative” were dramatic improvements in access to health insurance for neighborhood kids and their families.

Bridging the Bay

Mayfair is one of three Neighborhood Improvement Initiatives (NIIs) that have been sponsored by the Hewlett Foundation in the San Francisco Bay Area. Like the other two sites, the 7th Street/McClymonds Corridor in West Oakland and One East Palo Alto, Mayfair was selected for a grant after an exhaustive process of neighborhood identification (see Figure 1 for site locations). The initiative was expected to bring community leaders together for strategic planning and then implementation of a comprehensive community initiative. In each case, the initiative was initially managed by a local community foundation acting as an intermediary and ally.

Similar foundation-sponsored comprehensive community initiatives (CCIs) have emerged in other cities across the country, including Los Angeles, Atlanta, and Baltimore. The basic notion of CCIs is to go beyond the “bricks and mortar” approach of community development corporations, and instead focus on community vision, community-building, and community action. Rather than constructing houses or delivering services, the hope is that neighborhood leaders will leverage resources and relationships to solve neighborhood problems—and that, in the process, the poor will persuade the powerful that they share a common fate and a common destiny.

Regionalism is a potentially powerful complement to this framework. After a long period of metropolitan fragmentation, a new regionalist thinking has been on the upswing in America. Business leaders have recognized that the region is the level at which their companies tend to cluster and survive: the Silicon Valley, for example, is a recognizable economy with specific and identifiable interests in better education, transportation, and quality of life. Environmentalists have understood that planning city-by-city—or better put, suburb-by-suburb—has produced an urban sprawl that threatens farmland and open space. Environmental justice advocates recognize the need and potential to clean-up and reuse former industrial lands nestled in low-income and working poor communities of color in the urban core.

Advocates for social justice have likewise recognized the promise of regions. There are risks, of course: community advocates are concerned that local voice and power will be lost in larger coalitions, and worry that their organizations will lack the technical skills to effectively engage regional transportation authorities, business associations, and environmental planners. But the promise

is there as well: after all, the abandonment of inner city neighborhoods is directly connected to sprawl, and regional solutions have the potential to bring jobs and education to those who need it most.

Just as this vision of a new “community-based regionalism” was attracting interest, the Hewlett Foundation began moving forward its CCI process, opening with an initial planning investment in Mayfair in 1996, then following up in West Oakland in 1998 and in East Palo Alto in 1999. Hoping to add an explicit regional component to the overall project, the Foundation asked researchers at the Center for Justice, Tolerance, and Community (CJTC) at the University of California, Santa Cruz to work with the selected neighborhoods as a regional “coach”—linking the neighborhood initiatives with other equity-oriented actors across the Bay and developing

...the abandonment of inner city neighborhoods is directly connected to sprawl and regional solutions have the potential to bring jobs and education to those who need it most

Figure 1. The Neighborhoods and the Bay



...the move toward regionalism provides potential opportunities for neighborhood initiatives to develop, broker, and negotiate new relationships

community-based regional (CBR) strategies to address neighborhood issues.

The experience in this work varied: In San Jose, the Mayfair Improvement Initiative became engaged in broader regional discussions, partnered to secure health insurance, and explicitly incorporated a regional component in their long-term strategic plan. In West Oakland, leaders and organizers associated with the 7th Street Initiative were interested in regional opportunities early in their thinking and alliance-building, but other factors led to the closing of the CCI before strategies could be fully developed or implemented. In East Palo Alto, the Hewlett-funded effort is now gaining traction on the regional component of its agenda; while this slower pace had something to do with the organization's internal evolution, the internal dynamics of the community actually led to different and sometimes competing regionalist interests that had to be resolved before a common agenda could take hold.

We draw three lessons below that may be useful to a field that sometimes argues that "it takes a region to raise a neighborhood." To this mantra, we would add that:

It takes a leap...

Moving to the regional level involves an act of faith and leadership—community organizations that are resource-short need to be convinced and to convince their constituents that this is valuable work. This takes time and it also calls for hard analysis to see where regionalist interests collide and coincide within a neighborhood.

It takes learning...

Because it is a leap, an educational program needs to persuade, not pressure, organizations about the promise of regionalism. The best way to do this is to put community organizations in direct contact with others that have followed this path; fortunately, there are a growing number of community-based regionalists eager to share their success stories.

It takes a lever...

Moving a regional agenda is fundamentally an exercise around power and politics. Commu-

nity-based organizations need to be advocates, balancing a desire to collaborate with a willingness to engage in conflicts as necessary. This can be a challenging mix for foundation-sponsored initiatives but it is necessary to ensure community voice, participation and influence in regional decisions.

What is Community-based Regionalism?

Proponents of the new regional thinking vary in their emphasis and message, with business leaders arguing that the region is the level at which businesses cluster and must be promoted, and environmental advocates suggesting that only region-wide planning can stem sprawl and save open space. Those concerned about regional equity and community development have been intrigued by these debates, partly because each perspective offers the possibility of redirecting development and tax dollars to neglected communities.

Arguments for regional equity also vary. One school of thought stresses that inner ring suburbs are now seeing some of the same problems as central cities, even as wealthier suburbs continue to attract residents and taxes. The solution: municipal leaders should join forces across jurisdictions and equalize fiscal resources through regional revenue sharing. Another school argues that labor markets essentially function at a regional scale and puts its hope in a revitalized labor movement. The solution here: persuade central labor councils to become actively engaged in regional debates, pushing for living wages, community benefits agreements, and workforce training for "high-road" development.

A final variant has sometimes been termed "community-based regionalism." This perspective emphasizes the need for community-based and faith-based organizations to alter regional rules and rhetoric in a way that will improve outcomes for low-income communities. Strategies emerging out of this approach include efforts to link low-income residents to dynamic growth sectors, advocacy to insure that transpor-

tation systems serve all communities, and programs to improve indigenous home ownership in low-income neighborhoods in the process of gentrification.

In South Los Angeles, for example, the era after the 1992 civil unrest included the birth of an innovative grassroots group, AGENDA. In the mid-1990s, AGENDA challenged the decision of the City of Los Angeles to award a \$70 million subsidy to persuade the Dreamworks Studio to locate in West Los Angeles. Rather than a usual neighborhood approach—either kill the subsidy to redistribute the funds to local needs, or insist that the place of employment be situated in South L.A.—AGENDA catalyzed a coalition of community, labor, social service providers, and churches to fight for a commitment to train students from inner-city communities of color for jobs in this regional industry. After tussling with, then planning with, studio executives and city officials, the effort produced a multi-million dollar training program run through the community college system. It has since morphed into a larger program, Workplace Hollywood, that involves multiple studios throughout the region.

In Chicago's West Garfield Park community, members of the small Bethel Lutheran Church began in 1979 to fight the poverty and hopelessness that characterized their neighborhood. Over the next twenty years, Bethel New Life, Inc. created over 1,000 new housing units, placed over 7,000 people in living wage jobs, and brought \$110 million into their community. The group's first regionalist undertaking involved the Garfield Park Conservatory, a once nationally renowned attraction that had fallen into disrepair. Arguing that this local resource was an underutilized regional attraction, Bethel leadership and staff worked with the Chicago Park District to renovate the site, and host a new exhibit which brought over 500,000 people to the site in the first nine months. The conservatory is now a vibrant location for multiple cultural events and exhibits throughout the year, and continues to bring significant numbers of visitors to the neighborhood.

As a result of this organizing, Bethel was ready to respond when the commuter rail that ran through the neighborhood was threatened with closure. Recognizing that suburban residents further out on the rail line had a common interest in maintaining their service, Bethel formed an unusual alliance of city and suburban grassroots leaders and convinced the Chicago Transit Authority to not only keep the line open but also to make \$300 million in capital improvements. The Lake/Pulaski station in the neighborhood has now become the hub of Bethel's transit-oriented development strategy, with a 23,000 square foot commercial center that will house a day care facility, commercial enterprises, a clinic, employment services and job training.

The notion of unusual alliances also lies at the heart of the work of the Northwest Indiana Federation of Interfaith Organizations. The group's first campaign in the mid-1990s, "Operation Holy Ground", sought to rid their members' neighborhoods of drug houses; in the wake of victories on this front, leaders realized that no matter how many abandoned buildings were removed, the systemic causes of concentrated poverty still remained. The Federation thus began focusing on transportation as a strategy to ensure that neighborhood residents had access to basic goods and services as well as to jobs, many of which were in growing areas outside the urban core.

The Federation soon realized that an efficient transportation system was being hindered by the fragmentation of transportation systems that denied full access of central city African Americans to largely white suburbs. Of course, this also meant that suburban residents were inconvenienced in their treks to higher-paying downtown employment, and the Interfaith Federation redesigned their organizing and advocacy to work in coalition with suburban interests. The result: the establishment of a regional community-based coalition with enough influence and power over elected officials to direct establishment of a single transportation authority that meets the needs of the region, including and particularly the urban core.

Community-based regionalism places its faith in the ability of community-based and faith-based organizations to alter regional rules and rhetoric in a way that will improve outcomes for low-income communities

These examples and others suggest the potential benefits of incorporating regional thinking into community organizing and development. What is less clear is how we go from “here” to “there”: how can communities already under economic stress engage regionally, build coalitions, and bring the real benefits of regional development home? The experience of the neighborhood initiatives in the Bay Area offers some insights into the promise and pitfalls of regionalism.

State of the Bay

The Hewlett Neighborhood Improvement Initiative unfolded in a time of dramatic transformation in the Bay Area. With the proportion of employment in high-tech industries about three times that of the rest of the state, the area experienced the full force of the “dot.com” expansion of the mid-to late 1990s. Unemployment fell sharply in the metropolitan statistical areas, or MSAs, that contain our three focus neighborhoods: the San Francisco MSA which includes Marin and San Mateo Counties and also contains East Palo Alto; the Oakland MSA which includes both Contra Costa and Alameda Counties and also contains West Oakland; and the San Jose MSA, the regional economic powerhouse which includes Santa Clara County and

contains Mayfair (see Figure 2; unemployment figures for California and the Los Angeles area are included for reference).

While the boom eventually turned to bust, the initial growth in employment and income led to a sharp uptick in housing demand. As regional housing prices doubled, harried buyers began to discover neighborhoods traditionally home to low income, working class communities. In Mayfair, housing prices rose from about sixty

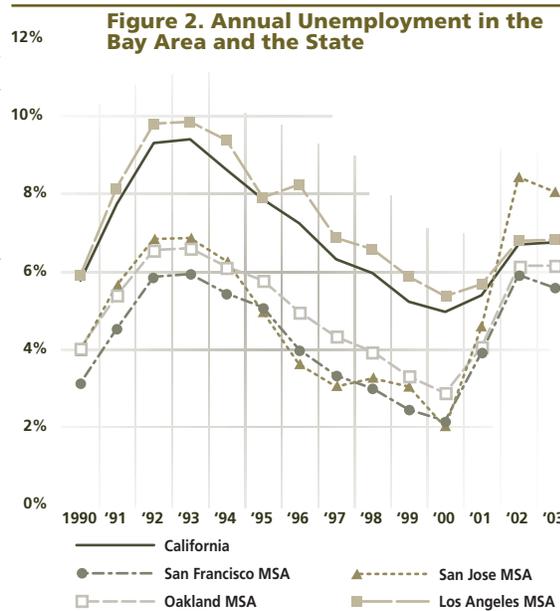
percent of the Santa Clara County average during 1996-97 to seventy percent of an even higher County average in 2001-2002; in West Oakland, relative prices rose from thirty percent of the Alameda County average to nearly sixty percent over the same period; and in East Palo Alto, the ratio of local to county housing prices rose from around 55 percent to nearly 80 percent.

With pressures on local housing so clearly set by outside forces—none of the neighborhoods had suddenly and independently become more attractive—regional dynamics were clearly on the mind of local leaders. Regionalism was also noticeable in the policy making arena, with both budding regionalists and their critics emerging on the political stage.

The San Francisco Bay Area has a long history of regional institutions, including the Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG) and the Bay Area Council. The mid-1990s also saw the emergence of Joint Venture: Silicon Valley Network (JV:SVN), a new business-led group that developed a regional indicators project, promoted economic clusters based on regional network models, and developed the notion that firms and cities in the region should “collaborate to compete.” This regional approach came to be strongly identified

with Silicon Valley’s economic success.

Critics rightly noted that a rising regional economic tide was not lifting all boats. San Jose’s Working Partnerships USA (WPUSA), a labor-affiliated think tank associated with the South Bay Central Labor Council, documented growing disparities in its own Silicon Valley backyard and warned of the growth of temporary work and volatile work lives.



Urban Habitat, an Oakland-based environmental justice group, criticized gentrification, called for regional tax-sharing, and organized a region-wide Social Equity Caucus of community leaders.

In the heady days of the 1990s boom, business became increasingly sympathetic to the calls for change. The Bay Area Council worked with community organizations and important community development intermediaries, such as the National Economic Development and Law Center and PolicyLink in Oakland, to develop an initiative to spur private investment in distressed areas. Joint Venture: Silicon Valley Network revised its annual Index of Silicon Valley to include measures of poverty, income distribution, and human capital. The Silicon Valley Manufacturing Group, a business association originally founded by David Packard, teamed up with housing advocates to lobby for affordable housing.

The market itself seemed primed for a favorable change. After years of serving as a pass-through community for high-wage commuters to the Silicon Valley, the City of East Palo Alto was approached by developers interested in building new commercial and office space. Despite doubts about the merits of big-box retail as an economic strategy, and neighborhood concerns about even more traffic, the City decided to bring in a Home Depot and eventually an IKEA, both of which were set to attract regional tax dollars to local coffers. The new developments presented serious challenges to the neighborhoods but also generated potential openings for community organizing for resident benefits.

In short, the move toward regionalism provided real as well as potential opportunities for neighborhood initiatives to develop, broker, and negotiate regional relationships with sympathetic Bay Area actors and even market forces, and finally leverage the region to make a difference locally.

The Neighborhood Context

Mayfair, West Oakland and One East Palo Alto were neighborhoods that shared a common experience of marginalization in the region's economic and political dynamics. Each has a demographic composition distinct from that of its surrounding county and poverty rates well in excess of the region (see Table 1 and Figure 3). But there are also important differences between and within the sites.

Moving a regional agenda is fundamentally an exercise around power and politics

Table 1 **The Neighborhoods and Their Counties**

	Mayfair	Santa Clara County	West Oakland	Alameda County	One East Palo Alto	San Mateo County
Population	8,349	1,682,585	14,127	1,443,741	13,855	707,161
% Anglo	2.9%	44.0%	5.6%	40.8%	3.1%	49.7%
% Latino	79.8%	24.0%	17.3%	19.0%	61.6%	21.8%
% African American	1.8%	2.5%	65.7%	14.4%	25.1%	3.3%
% Asian Pacific Islander	13.6%	25.7%	7.9%	20.8%	7.9%	21.1%
% Other	2.0%	3.7%	3.5%	5.0%	2.3%	4.1%
Foreign-born	59.2%	34.1%	16.9%	27.2%	43.2%	32.3%
Non-citizen	42.2%	20.0%	10.6%	15.4%	34.1%	16.5%
Of foreign-born, % entered in 1990s	50.2%	46.3%	34.7%	42.3%	44.8%	36.5%
Of foreign-born, % entered in 1980s	33.2%	29.8%	48.8%	32.1%	34.0%	29.5%
Of foreign-born, % entered earlier	16.6%	23.9%	16.5%	25.6%	21.2%	33.9%
Median Age of Population	26.6	34.0	29.3	34.5	25.3	36.8
of African-Americans	33.0	32.3	30.5	33.5	37.3	37.4
of Latinos	24.7	26.1	24.1	26.3	21.8	27.3
Median Household Income	\$53,833	\$74,335	\$22,073	\$55,946	\$53,056	\$70,819
Median Family Income	\$51,685	\$81,717	\$23,360	\$65,857	\$50,929	\$80,737
Per capita income	\$12,233	\$32,795	\$12,996	\$26,680	\$13,391	\$36,045

Mayfair, with a population of approximately 8,500 in 2000, is the most ethnically homogeneous neighborhood. Nearly eighty percent of the population is Latino, and the neighborhood is an immigrant entry point: nearly 60% of the population is foreign-born and half of those came in the 1990s. The neighborhood has relatively high rates of labor force participation (that is, people working or actively seeking work), with workers significantly over-represented in production, construction and service occupations. High costs of living are reflected in large, often multi-family households, with nearly 25% of households in Mayfair consisting of seven or more people.

West Oakland is a predominantly African-American neighborhood of 14,000 residents. Though the Latino population in West Oakland has grown to a sizeable minority (17.3%), the percentage of foreign-born residents is actually below the figure for the county, and the share of foreign-born who came in the last decade is well below that of the county. Of the three NIIs, West Oakland had the highest poverty rates, with 36.2% of the population living below the official poverty line and a total of 60.8% of the population living below 200% of the official poverty line, a more reasonable measure of self-sufficiency in this high-cost region.

One East Palo Alto is a portion of the city of East Palo Alto. The neighborhood had an official population of 13,855 in 2000. African-Americans, who were a solid majority in the 1980s, now represent just 25% of neighborhood residents. They tend to be older, with a high proportion (66%) of home-owners and a smaller average household

size. Latinos now constitute nearly 62% of the population and tend to be significantly younger, more recently migrated, and more engaged in the labor market. Latino home ownership is high (50%) although below that of African Americans in the area. The percent of recently arrived immigrants is actually close to that of the county, suggesting that East Palo Alto has become an attractor for more established migrants seeking to get their share of the American dream of home ownership, though as we note below, Latino households seem to be stretching to ownership through overcrowding and resource pooling.

Thinking and Linking Regionally

How did each of the sites grapple with what we have termed “community-based regionalism?”

The *Mayfair Improvement Initiative (MII)* clearly considered the neighborhood’s position in the regional context from its very beginnings in 1996. Since Mayfair serves as an initial entry point for many immigrants, neighborhood residents frequently move on to other locations, helping promote a visceral understanding of the interconnectedness between the neighborhood

and the region. Leaders of the initiative have strong personal and historical ties to regional government entities and the organization created an advisory group of external policy makers early in the initiative’s framing of issues and implementation of strategies.

However, building effective alliances at a regional level has also been challenging. Describing its position as “a little fish in fast running waters,” Mayfair has

Figure 3. Poverty Levels in the Neighborhoods

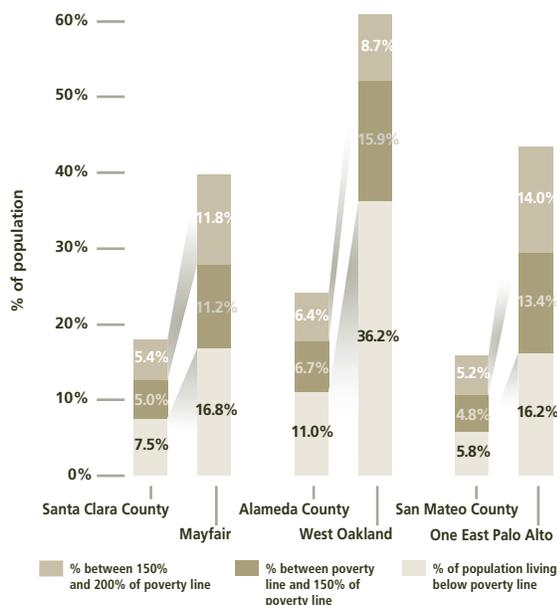


Table 2 Neighborhood and County Workforces

	Mayfair	Santa Clara County	West Oakland	Alameda County	One East Palo Alto	San Mateo County
Males older than 25	2,342	556,676	3,791	458,104	3,538	236,459
% with < high school	61.9%	15.6%	35.8%	17.4%	57.8%	14.9%
% with B.A. or more	7.8%	44.4%	14.0%	36.5%	7.1%	40.9%
Females older than 25	2,186	556,382	4,388	495,612	3,448	253,826
% with < high school	56.7%	17.6%	31.5%	17.9%	50.4%	14.6%
% with B.A. or more	9.2%	36.6%	13.3%	33.5%	9.9%	37.3%
Labor Force Participation						
Males	64.7%	75.3%	57.2%	71.5%	64.5%	73.6%
Females	46.9%	58.9%	51.7%	59.4%	55.5%	59.7%
Full-timer Workers as % of Workers						
Males	61.0%	72.0%	56.6%	68.5%	63.2%	71.4%
Females	46.1%	56.6%	47.3%	54.8%	52.8%	57.8%
Labor force participation						
Latino males	64.5%	71.9%	69.2%	70.6%	69.8%	72.6%
Black males	77.4%	76.3%	53.2%	61.7%	50.1%	60.6%

had to learn to understand the diverse interests of multiple actors in regional decision-making processes even as it seeks to avoid being overwhelmed by the agendas of its more powerful allies. Its participation in regional coalitions has been highly selective and constantly weighed against the immediate interests and goals of the Mayfair neighborhood, particularly the need to keep regionalism relevant not just to key leaders, but to many community residents who have strong expectations about local service provision. MII thus actively participated in San Jose’s Strong Neighborhoods Initiative, an effort to redirect redevelopment dollars away from downtown to struggling neighborhoods, managing to secure third priority in a queue of twenty areas vying for city dollars. Both this and the Children’s Health Initiative effort to tap county and city tobacco settlement funds showed the power of linking local organizing with regional resources and policy.

undocumented workers in the area.

Despite the challenges, the residents’ and community’s incorporation of a regional component to Mayfair’s work has been wholehearted. The organization’s strategic plan now sees MII as a “neighborhood-based intermediary” with a strong community-based regional perspective injected throughout its organizational structure and goals.

West Oakland, home to the *7th Street/McClymonds Initiative (7th Street)* also embraced regionalism in the early stages of its development. Worried about the community’s historical isolation, a number of people in the Initiative’s early Board and staff grasped the importance of a regional perspective and emphasized the need to secure local economic benefits from facilities located in and near West Oakland, such as the Port of Oakland and the Oakland Army base. Building on a history of community activism, some leaders were ready to link with other efforts, such as

At the same time, MII’s experience in workforce development initiatives has given its leaders an appreciation for the potential vulnerabilities of being too dependent on regional dynamics. The Initiative had an early focus on technology training but the subsequent high-tech collapse has diminished job hopes in that area. MII commissioned a study outlining a potential sectoral approach to workforce training, but then decided on a more straightforward set of basic adult learning services, including instruction in English. This made sense partly because of the very low level of education of the labor force (see Table 2) and the high percentage of

...developing community-based regionalist strategies means first ensuring a stable organization and securing a strong local base before reaching to a regional scale

the Social Equity Caucus, to challenge regional decisions on housing, transportation, and employment.

Some regionalist-style coalitions and activities were often directed at the City level, partly because Oakland itself is quite sizable and its redevelopment agency is quite active. A common city-wide agenda seemed possible: the pressures of gentrification were also affecting other low-income neighborhoods in Oakland, such as San Antonio and Fruitvale. One problem for West Oakland, however, was that these other neighborhoods were already highly visible in the sights of policymakers, with the San Antonio district the site of another foundation-sponsored

initiative and the Fruitvale district the location of a much-celebrated transit-oriented development initiative.

Another challenge was the nature of the West Oakland workforce. Much of regionalist thinking ascribes employment problems to a lack of connections to opportunities outside the neighborhood: the story goes that if only transportation, training, and social networks were available, local residents could readily link to regional employment opportunities. This, however, is a strategy more suited to the working poor and not to those faced with longer term barriers to employment. As Figure 4 illustrates, West Oakland was the NII with the least significant

Figure 4. Working Poverty in the Bay Area



presence of such working poor. Nearly sixty percent of households with children in West Oakland were headed by single

mothers, a factor often associated with non-working poverty; by contrast, three quarters of the Mayfair households with children were headed by married couples, a factor associated with labor force participation. A sizable portion of the West Oakland residents between the ages of 21 and 64—about sixty percent

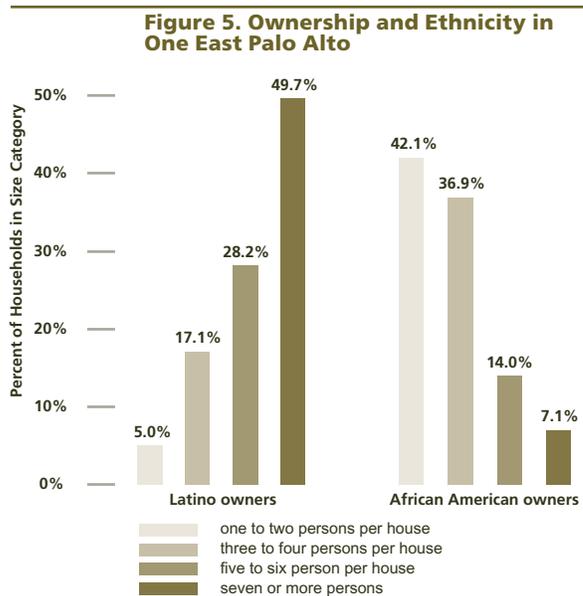
more than the share in Mayfair or East Palo Alto and more than twice the level for Alameda County—are classified by the Census as having a disability and not employed, with former defined to include psychological barriers to working as well as physical and other employment disabilities. This is a more basic set of workforce development barriers and it is one that requires more than new connections.

A final problem for 7th Street was continual turn-over in board and staff leadership, a trend that made it difficult for regionalist perspectives and strategies to take firm institutional root. The departure of 7th Street’s original executive director in early 2002 led to a focus on internal dynamics, while a Hewlett Foundation-induced shift in mid-2002 to a more outcomes-based model presented a challenge to the struggling organization. Leaders and staff did continue to participate in regional coalitions and scored an impressive victory by aligning with environmental advocates to target the shutdown of the largest fixed source of air pollution in the neighborhood, a now-shuttered yeast factory, partly to put in place the conditions for a transit-oriented development project. Still, continuing internal problems, an inability to secure a new director, and challenging relationships with the initiative’s two foundation partners led to dissolution of this NII in late 2002.

While the regionalist approach probably had little to do with this—and a wide range of West Oakland’s leaders continued to participate in gatherings of the Bay Area’s community-based regionalists—it does suggest that community-based regionalism is only as powerful as the

community organizations that are its base. Still, one observer of the 7th Street effort has noted that the “tools, skills and questions learned from regionalism discussions are visible in policy discussions. There’s an increased training and knowledge base now...it is less quantifiable but still powerful.”

One East Palo Alto (OEPA) comprises a set of neighborhoods within the larger city of East Palo Alto. As the most recent of the initiatives, it is natural that it would lag on both internal organization and regional linkage; while that is the case, the reasons go beyond timing. There are, in fact, significant potential conflicts within the area about the appropriate regional agenda.



East Palo Alto underwent significant demographic changes over the 1990s, with the Latino population in the whole city doubling even as the African American population declined by over thirty percent. But beneath this apparent difference in ethnicity lay critical divergences in other factors: in OEPA, African Americans are, on

average, 15.5 years older than Latinos, a much greater gap than the 6.5 year difference between these two groups in the state as a whole. As indicated earlier, Latinos and African Americans are both stretching for the dream of home ownership but in different ways: as can be seen in Figure 5, in One East Palo Alto, nearly fifty percent of Latino-owned households have seven or more members while 42 percent of African American-owned households had one to two members.

These differences in age and housing conditions complicated efforts to find common ground.

...the tools, skills and questions learned from regionalism discussions are visible in policy discussions. There’s an increased training and knowledge base now—it is less quantifiable but still powerful

Moving to the regional level involves an act of faith—community organizations that are resource-short need to be convinced and to convince their constituents that this is an important strategy.

Older residents were more likely to be benefiting from the increase in housing prices and were not as interested in development that would lead to even more people, more traffic, and more changes. Younger residents and families were less reluctant to trade off congestion for an improvement in economic opportunity. Into this scenario came a proposal by IKEA to place a branch of the home furnishing chain right off the freeway but smack in the middle of an already heavily traveled area. While the City government and some advocates argued that IKEA was a potential source of sales tax and entry-level jobs, critics painted it as another external imposition, with one resident arguing that “IKEA will serve the Bay Area, not East Palo Alto.”

This, of course, was exactly the point: IKEA was supposed to bring in regional retail dollars that were going elsewhere and could instead help address the fiscal disparities plaguing East Palo Alto. As the issue heated up, OEPA was still involved in building community across lines of race and age, and so while sharp political lines were being drawn in preparation of a crucial election in which voters decided, by the slimmest of majorities, to approve IKEA’s location, OEPA instead turned its attention to education. As Figure 6 shows, this was a reasonable focus for all three sites since on a statewide rank of academic performance, local elementary schools were doing quite poorly relative to their respective counties. With this focus in place, OEPA leaders helped further a process of change in the local district that eventually led to new reformers joining the school board.

The turn inward rather than outward made sense in light of divergent interests but it also reflected a long-standing history: the City of East Palo Alto, which was once unincorporated territory of San Mateo County, was actually formed in an act of separation and challenge from a broader polity that had ignored this historically African American enclave. Charting a separate path was a familiar experience for community

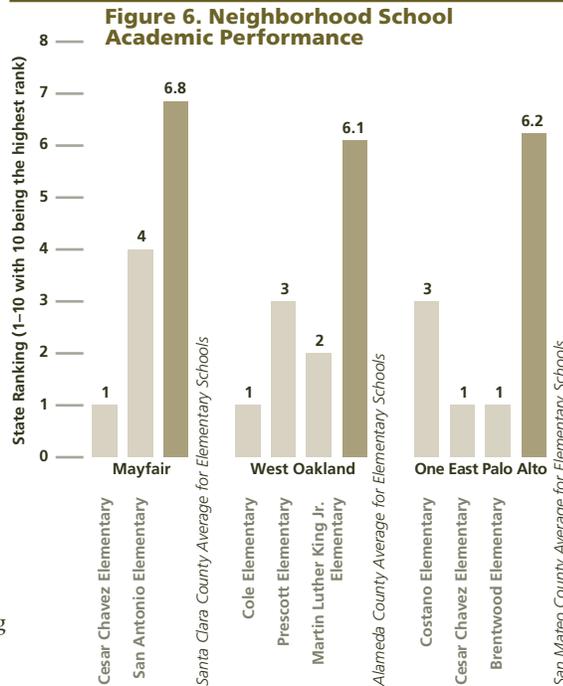
residents, and OEPA had to turn inward to build cohesion and trust, particularly across racial lines, before it could challenge local leaders to take on broad regional issues.

This regional thrust has emerged recently, with OEPA’s new strategic plan calling for the organization to broker regional resources and develop leadership to advocate for policy change in the areas of economic independence, education, and neighborhood safety. The experience suggests the importance of phasing in the regional dimension to a

community’s work—much as in West Oakland, developing community-based regionalist strategies means first ensuring a stable organization and securing a strong local base before reaching to a regional scale.

Learning from the Neighborhoods

The stories of the neighborhoods reflect unique and uneven experiences with regionalism. In all three cases, community leaders and residents appreciated the value of better understanding regional dynamics and were able to use this greater understanding to identify valuable opportunities at a regional scale. Yet in all three cases, the initiatives struggled with regionalism, differed



in their balance of local and regional work, and experienced challenges in applying the new skills and capacities necessary for developing regional scale approaches.

One factor that clearly contributes to the growth of a community-based regionalism perspective is *the regional context for the neighborhood efforts*. While regional perspectives have been strong throughout the Bay Area, they have been strongest in the South Bay and the spillover to Mayfair was natural. Mayfair was also a well-known neighborhood in the region's largest city and the initiative came into existence when City and regional leaders were seeking to address past disparities, including an excessive focus on downtown development at the expense of poor neighborhoods. Both East Palo Alto and West Oakland have been more marginal to their regional context, and the neighborhood initiatives emerged into the field just as Oakland's leaders became preoccupied with their own downtown redevelopment and San Mateo's leadership began to worry about the high-tech slowdown. Both West Oakland and East Palo Alto have also been the subject of previous failed interventions by well-meaning external actors, making community residents suspicious of outside opportunities and institutions.

Another factor that seems to matter is *the internal dynamics of the neighborhoods themselves*. A level of social and political coherence within the neighborhood may make it easier for neighborhoods to find common interests in a regional agenda. Statistics must be disaggregated to uncover important differences: One East Palo Alto may have a significant problem of overcrowding (see Figure 7) but it is far more prevalent in Latino households. Such internal dynamics led to different external interests and so OEPA and other

diverse initiatives generally have to focus first on the kind of community organizing that can build a unified social fabric. The nature of poverty also seems to matter, with the working poor more likely to see benefits of regional collaborations or opportunities, a trend that seems to be echoed in other regionalist experiences in Los Angeles, Milwaukee, and elsewhere.

Equally important are *the technical skills to engage*



in substantive regional issues, including the ability to analyze labor markets, offer transportation policy options, and leverage alternative financing for affordable housing. Neighborhood organizations face the challenge of developing these skills internally or relying on supportive partners. The latter strategy was pursued by all three initiatives but Mayfair seemed to be best at nurturing outside help, including its early adoption of an advisory board and its strategic use of technical consultants.

Also essential is the internal strength of the organization itself. Not surprisingly, regional strategies, like local efforts, require a stable and strong organization with clear processes of decision-making, effective operations

and a mix of skilled managers as well as community leaders. The three sites all grappled with the transition and development of community leaders and the selection, grooming, and continuity of skilled staff able to build institutions as well as programs. Continuity of leadership both within the organization and throughout the community is particularly important when leaders must challenge their own constituents to “think and link” to the region. There is, after all, no community-based regionalism without a community base: organizational authenticity, leadership vision, and staff effectiveness are all crucial elements.

Another important factor is the willingness to advocate for policy change. Around the country, those organizations most successful at community-based regionalism are willing to engage in direct organizing and policy advocacy, rather than simply a service- or project-based, approach. Project-based approaches tend to be more inward,

more cautious, and more consensual, while policy-based approaches utilize “power mapping” to understand the political lay of the land and employ strategies that include collaboration as well as conflict with regional players. With comprehensive community initiatives needing

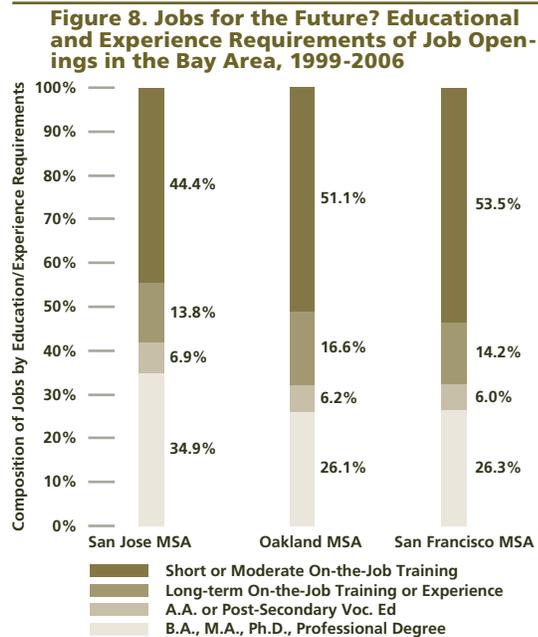
to tend to both service delivery and community building, regional advocacy can be a challenge, but it is nonetheless necessary to influence policies and decisionmaking processes that are responsible for neighborhood conditions.

Connected to this is an orientation to changing the rules of the game. Accumulating local development projects will not lead to systematic change, for example, if a state’s overall tax rules encourage low-wage jobs through promoting big box retail and discouraging industrial job development.

Even job training can be

limited since in the much-vaunted new economy, the majority of new job openings require only short-to-medium term on-the-job training (see Figure 8); as a result, communities will also need to help change the nature of employment itself, working in partnerships for productivity even as they lobby for living wages, access to health insurance, and basic labor protections. Regional strategies, in short, require a focus on the rules that shape the evolution of the region itself; the challenge is to envision and implement a new regional future that includes everyone.

Finally, there is the role of external allies and resources. All three initiatives had significant relationships with outside organizations and individuals, including local community foundations, technical assistance providers, and the Hewlett Foundation. While external help was intended to complement community capacity, the local initiatives were sometimes overwhelmed



by the amount of outside help. This lesson is a particularly crucial one for community-based regionalism: Organizations that negotiate the bridge between regional opportunities and local needs are most successful when they can identify which of the plethora of regional issues is most relevant to the goals and needs of their own constituent population. This requires that they be able to ‘push back’ when their vision does not match that of their funding agencies, technical assistance providers, and regional partners. A community’s ability to do this is shaped by the strength of its base constituency, the degree of its self confidence and sustainability, the clarity of its vision and goals, the sensitivity of external allies to the perspectives of community residents and leaders, and the willingness of both communities and allies to learn and adapt.

New Directions for Community-Based Regionalism

Enthusiasm about community-based regionalism is building across the country. Many organizations have adopted the mantra, as demonstrated by the over 600 participants, the vast majority from communities of color, that attended a National Summit on Regional Equity, organized by PolicyLink and the Funders’ Network for Smart Growth and Livable Communities, that was held in Los Angeles in November 2002. Innovative examples of community-based regional strategies have surfaced, foundations are funding new work in this arena, and a steady stream of research is suggesting the benefits from this new approach to community empowerment.

We share the excitement. However, the analysis offered here of three comprehensive community initiatives in the Bay Area—one of the most regionally conscious of metropolitan areas—suggests that when regionalism hits the community ground, it may sometimes stumble as well as succeed.

We believe that the experience suggests three broad implications for how advocates of community-based regionalism could and should engage local communities:

It takes a leap...

Successfully developing and implementing community-based regionalism is not easy. Moving to the regional level involves a leap of faith as well as open and visionary leadership that can convince community constituents that this is an important arena for action. Even with a strong regional perspective, it takes time to effectively identify and take advantage of regional opportunities. Internal neighborhood dynamics can draw important energy away from capitalizing on regional opportunities, while the substantial skills and political savvy required to be effective at a regional scale can be daunting. Phasing is crucial: internal coherence and not regional partnerships should be first on a community’s agenda. Those who promote regionalism should be both enthusiastic and cautious: regional strategies are simply one way of trying to promote community development—a way that may not be appropriate in all contexts or at all times.

It takes learning...

Because this is a leap, an educational program needs to persuade, not pressure, community-based organizations about the promise of regionalism. Often, the regionalist “epiphany” grows directly out of organizing experiences such as the Children’s Health Initiative or Bethel New Life’s program of community revitalization, both of which allowed leaders to understand first-hand that local solutions sometimes require regional levers. The process can be helped along by peer-to-peer learning: we found that putting Bay Area neighborhood leaders in direct contact with advocates from Los Angeles, Chicago, and elsewhere made the strategy seem both real and doable. Advocates of regionalism also need to develop ways to more rapidly share experiences and best practices. We need to talk honestly about what works and what doesn’t—and why. The earliest phase of community-based regionalism probably involved “boosterism”: trying to persuade social actors of a good new idea, it tended to gloss over the potential challenges, needed capacities, and clear pitfalls. We need a more clear-headed assessment, one that will move the movement forward on more solid ground over time.

We need to talk honestly about what works and what doesn’t—and why

It takes a lever...

Moving a regional agenda is fundamentally an exercise around power and politics. Other types of community development activities, such as delivering effective services to neighborhood residents and promoting distinct projects within the neighborhood, can be valuable parts of anti-poverty efforts, but they do not always address the broader political and economic terrain that may be contributing to those neighborhood problems. Community-based regionalism, by contrast, is aimed not just at affecting particular projects and policies, but also at transforming the 'rules of the game' in regional decision-making processes.

What is needed to ensure that community-based organizations have an on-going role in the regional game? Pulling the lever for change, we would suggest, requires an appropriate vision, strong alliances, and the power to make your voice heard. These are all challenging elements, particularly for struggling initiatives that might be reluctant to tip the political boat and for community-based groups worried that their concerns will be drowned out in the cacophony of a regional discussion. In any case, advocacy and organizing are essential components, although being selective and effective is always a challenge.

Despite the difficulties, community-based regionalism may offer new hope for those struggling for community development and empowerment. Across America, neighborhoods and neighbors are seeking to both construct and connect, to build homes and jobs even as they build community. On a practical level, much of this will be easier if regional strategies promote opportunity for all rather than economic and social segregation. On a political level, more will be achieved if lower-income neighborhoods band together and put their vision and voice into the regional policy process.

Foundations, regional leaders, and other potential allies can help by opening doors and promoting real participation by community-based groups in regional decision-making processes. Community-based groups can help by accepting the challenge of operating in a new and some-

what uncomfortable terrain of action but one that is likely to provide complementary support for shared goals of a better future for individuals, families, and communities.

Reverend Cheryl Rivera, executive director of the Northwest Indiana Interfaith Federation, has argued that "Metropolitan organizing is about changing the rules of the game so that those who have not, will have...Metropolitan organizing is the new civil rights movement, and we must be persistent."

The comparison should fill us with both caution and hope. Civil rights, after all, remains an unfinished business. Yet progress, however imperfect and incomplete, has been made, largely because of the courage and commitment of generations of activists and community leaders. Regionalist thinking and action offers new avenues for strengthening community development in low-income neighborhoods of color; realizing its potential will require that we build a movement even as we build our communities.





For additional copies of this summary report or information on the larger report on which it is based, please contact:

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