

Problem Assessment

As the nation's 40th largest city with a population of over 450,000 residents, the City of Mesa, Arizona is committed to providing a high quality of life within its many neighborhoods. As the City continues to grow and become more diverse, a process was needed that would facilitate greater community involvement in improving neighborhood quality of life through collaborative partnerships between the public, private, and non-profit sectors. In response to the need to revitalize Mesa's maturing neighborhoods, the City

Council adopted the Opportunity Zone (OZ) Program in 2001. The intent of the OZ Program is to improve the safety and welfare of Mesa residents by focusing City and community resources within a mature neighborhood (defined as a neighborhood between 25-35 years old) where



stakeholders have expressed concern about declining quality of life as indicated by higher than average crime rates, housing maintenance violations, inadequate street lighting, etc.

One of the more unique features of the OZ Program is that neighborhood improvement activities are resident-driven; residents, business owners, and neighborhood faith-based organizations, as the primary neighborhood stakeholders, are deemed to be in the best position to identify and prioritize the needs of their neighborhood. Working side by side with City staff, members of the various stakeholder groups form Resident Action Teams based upon specific issues of concern. These teams then meet regularly over the 12-18 months that the neighborhood is formally designated as an OZ.

Program Implementation & Costs

While the OZ Program has been in operation since 2001, the focus of this nomination will be on the Reed Park Neighborhood OZ (the City's second OZ) which was adopted by Council in October 2004 and was completed in December 2005. The process for selecting appropriate OZ candidate neighborhoods, or those neighborhoods that are between 25-35 years of age and beginning to display signs of physical decline, involved a series of meetings with staff from each City department. From these meetings, a list of 7 candidate neighborhoods was developed. Staff then conducted extensive research on each of these areas that explored several key socio-economic and physical quality of life indicators.



These indicators were then placed into a matrix that assigned an objective numerical score to each candidate neighborhood. One of the most significant indicators examined was the existing social and organizational capacity, or willingness of the neighborhood stakeholders to remain engaged in a 12-18 month neighborhood revitalization program. The Reed Park Neighborhood, which scored highest in this process, was formally designated as Mesa's second OZ in September 2004.

Following this designation, a neighborhood meeting was held in October in which over 100 stakeholders (residents, business owners, and faith-based organization representatives) participated. During this meeting, participants identified the major issues facing the Reed Park Neighborhood, and five Resident Action Teams were formed to begin developing short and long-term plans for addressing these issues. The following teams, comprised of 75 residents, were formed: Neighborhood Beautification Team, Public Safety Team, Social Issues Team, Traffic & Streets Team, and the Business Issues Team.

With regards to OZ Program costs, neighborhood improvements are funded through a

combination of City General Fund monies (\$50,000 budgeted for FY 04-05), federally funded Community Development Block Grants, and private sector donations of labor and materials. The General Fund allocation of \$50,000 is used to fund revitalization projects that are performed by internal City departments. Examples of these types of projects include Traffic Engineering studies performed to mitigate traffic hazards, “spot” street light improvements, and the placement of 30-yard “Clean Sweep” roll-off containers provided by the City’s Solid Waste Division. Because one of the cornerstones of the OZ Program is the strengthening of neighborhood ties and commitment, members of the Resident Action Teams as well as other community groups are encouraged to volunteer their time and talents in an effort to reduce program costs. During the 14 months of program implementation over 1,500 volunteer hours were logged on various improvement projects, representing a \$26,300 investment in the neighborhood.



Tangible Results

The Reed Park Neighborhood OZ Program, which provided services to a resident population of over 7,300 residents (69 percent of which earned incomes at or below the Low to Moderate Income range as defined by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development), had an enormous positive impact on the quality of life in the area. Based upon the short and long-term neighborhood goals that were set by the members of the Resident Action Teams, the following neighborhood improvements were completed in the OZ:

- Intensive City Code enforcement resulted in the opening of 142 cases (87% were closed voluntarily).
- \$390,000 in Community Development Block Grant funding was approved for the

installation of 77 new street lights in an area of inadequate street lighting.

- Twenty-three Clean Sweep Projects were completed using 125 roll-off containers and resulted in the removal of over 250 tons of trash from the neighborhood.
- Over \$162,000 in home improvements occurred.
- 17 alleys were cleaned of debris and overgrown vegetation.
- The City's Housing Services Office completed 5 Housing Rehabilitations (\$141,420)
- 13 Night Safety Walks were conducted to educate residents about Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design and how to make their homes safer.
- As a result of crime prevention education and proactive policing, total Part I Crimes in the neighborhood declined by 11%.
- Police Calls for Service in the area declined by 5%, resulting in a Police Patrol savings of over \$7,000.
- City staff and Resident Action Team members provided assistance to a local business owner in the opening of a new neighborhood business, an investment of \$260,000.
- Four homes were painted using volunteers and paint provided by the City's recycled Paint Re-Use Program.



In addition to the above listed results, resident-members of the Social Issues Team have partnered with the neighborhood's elementary school to provide additional opportunities for adults to participate in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. In order to provide job training

and life skills, Social Issues Team members have also partnered with a neighborhood faith-based organization to provide free computer literacy classes for neighborhood residents. Arguably, the greatest program benefit provided to the neighborhood residents is the added organizational capacity and social cohesion that has resulted through the formation and continued collaboration of the 75 members of the Resident Action Teams. Many of these residents continue to be very active in the neighborhood, and are now more knowledgeable concerning how to research and obtain resources to address their needs.

Lessons Learned

The key lesson that was learned following the completion of the Reed Park Neighborhood OZ concerns the importance of properly measuring the capacity and willingness of the neighborhood residents and business owners to become involved in the revitalization process. With this in mind, staff has revised the selection process for future OZ program areas. In addition to receiving input from various departments concerning the selection of OZ candidate neighborhoods and conducting analyses of quality of life indicators, meetings are now held within each candidate neighborhood prior to formal selection. These meetings serve two purposes. First, they allow staff to more accurately measure the neighborhood's capacity or willingness to participate. Second, these meetings allow for the earlier identification of salient issues within each neighborhood and for the formation of Resident Action Teams based upon those issues. The OZ Program has been proven to be an effective and efficient means of fostering community partnerships, engaging neighborhood stakeholders in revitalization activities, and providing opportunities for residents to assume leadership roles in their community. The resident-driven nature of the OZ Program allows residents to take active ownership and be part of the solution to improving their neighborhood rather than passive observers.