

## **A HISTORY OF BATTLE CREEK'S NEIGHBORHOOD PLANNING COUNCILS**

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In the original Community Development Block Grant legislation approved in 1974, Congress included a provision for the creation of what were then known as “*Citizen’s District Councils*”. This was an effort to involve citizens, and particularly the low and moderate-income citizens that the program was designed to assist, in decisions in the development, implementation and evaluation of the performance of their community in the use of these funds.

In fact, in January of 1973, the City of Battle Creek had already created and was involving residents in “*Citizens District Councils*” which were required under the State legislation called “The Blighted Areas Act”, or Act 344 of the Public Acts of 1945.

At a special public hearing on January 18, 1973, the City Commission presented plans for the potential redevelopment of the Franklin school district area, and at that meeting, plans for the old Franklin school site were unveiled. Since P.A. 344 was to be utilized, they also had to present plans for the creation of Citizen’s District Council. This act required that:

*“For each district area, a Citizen’s District council of not less than 12 nor more than 25 members shall be selected in a manner that ensures that the Citizen’s District Council is to the maximum extent possible, representative of the residents of the area and other persons with a demonstrable and substantial interest in the area. The majority of the Citizen’s District Council shall be composed of citizens living in the development area.”*

The Act went on to specify length of terms on the council, and offered alternatives for selection to the council --- either by a direct election or appointment the Chief Executive Officer of the municipality, with approval of the City Commission. The role of the Citizens Advisory Council was always intended to be advisory. From the minutes of the City Commission meeting on January 18, 1973, there was a lot of discussion on this issue, including how the council would be selected. A number of people actually wanted them to be elected, and some members of the public suggested that 15 separate areas be established --- with 15 separate councils. Then Mayor Frederick Brydges expressed his appreciation for the “high level of interest and enthusiasm”.

On January 23, 1973, Resolution No. 387 was approved by the City Commission which authorized the creation of “The Citizen’s District Council for the Neighborhood Development Project No. 1”. It said that membership shall be 25 members, with 15 members to be selected by direct election by residents of the area, and ten members to be appointed by the Mayor. The mayor would appoint a nominating committee with the task of identifying 25 names from which the 15 would be elected.

On March 23, 1973, the Franklin Neighborhood conducted an election at Franklin school to elect the first 15 members of the Citizens District Council. On August 25<sup>th</sup> of that year, the Citizen’s District Council held a Neighborhood Festival, inviting all of the City Commissioners to share in their accomplishments and offer support in the pursuit of grant funds. This group continued to meet, in spite of no funding for the projects that they were created to oversee. They also continued to hold annual festivals, keeping their enthusiasm for neighborhood revitalization strong.

The entire project was known as the “Neighborhood Development Program,” was part of the historic federal program known as “Urban Renewal”. The Neighborhood Development Program would later expand to include the Post School area, as well as the Lincoln and Ann J. Kellogg School areas.

On September 24, 1974, in his weekly Mayor's Report, Mayor Brydges outlined a new federal program known as the Community Development Block Grant Program. This Act was intended to consolidate a variety of other programs, including Model Cities, Urban Renewal, Neighborhood Facilities, and HUD Water and Sewer Programs. It also included a fairly significant requirement for citizen involvement in the creation of priorities, and since the Act became effective on January 1, 1975, there was very little time for many cities to put all of the pieces together for an application. Battle Creek, he said, was ahead of the game because it already had the Citizen's District Council in place. Sure enough, the very first CDBG Project submitted for funding was the Franklin School area development that allowed for the relocation of Franklin School to their new site at Newark and Main Streets.

Another important date in the history of Neighborhood Planning Councils was January 7, 1975, when with Resolution #444, the City Commission adopted the first "Plan for Citizen Participation" calling for the creation of a "Community Development Advisory Council", and was a requirement of the early CDBG Program. A "Community Development Advisory Council" was never required or mandated under the Federal regulations. Communities were merely required to seek input into the community development needs of the community through some citizen participation mechanism.

Today's Neighborhood Planning Councils are far less formal or institutionalized than those originally required by law for planning under a state or federal grant program. The City of Battle Creek has Neighborhood Planning Councils because they **WANT** to have them --- not because we are **REQUIRED** to have them.

In November of 1979, the Battle Creek City Planning Commission adopted "The Neighborhood Planning Council Organization Plan". This plan adopted the first five Neighborhood Planning Councils, covering all of the primarily residential areas of the City at the time. Their purpose was to Act:

***“. . . In an advisory capacity to the Planning Commission, the councils shall prepare a Comprehensive Plan for the development and revitalization of their respective neighborhoods . . . “***

This Plan suggested that Councils be comprised of not less than 15 nor more than 25 members, appointed by the City Commission on three-year staggered terms. The Plan created five Neighborhood Planning Council areas:

**POST – FRNKLIN  
NORTHCENTRAL  
CENTRAL  
FREMONT-MCKINLEY-VERONA  
URBANDALE**

Since the area of the entire City was covered in the Plan, three additional areas, primarily nonresidential in character were also designated; although no Neighborhood Planning Councils were formed to cover these areas.

**CENTRAL BUSINESS DISTRICT  
FORT CUSTER INDUSTRIAL PARK  
W.K. KELLOGG AIRPORT**

After adoption by the Planning Commission, the Neighborhood Planning Council Organization Plan was sent to the City Commission, and approved in Resolution #423, on November 20, 1979. This adoption resolution stated:

*“ . . . Whereas, the participation of citizens from geographic areas predominately residential in character in the preparation of the Plan for the Revitalization of Neighborhoods, including the programming and implementation of improvement projects and the Evaluation of Services affecting the residential environment, has been experienced and found to be important and desirable;*

*Now, therefore be I resolved, that Neighborhood Planning Councils be established in accordance with the Organization Plan attached to advise and counsel with the Planning Commission on matters relating to current and long-range planning and programming of Physical Development Projects and Supporting Services necessary to revitalize and improve the quality of the City’s Neighborhoods.”*

With the merger of Battle Creek Township and the City of Battle Creek in 1983, it became necessary to amend the Plan and include the creation of three additional Neighborhood Planning Councils to encompass the former Township Neighborhoods.

**RURAL SOUTHWEST  
WESTLAKE – PRAIRIEVIEW  
MINGES BROOK – RIVERSIDE**

The originally created “Central” neighborhood was also expanded to include the Territorial School area, and was really the only neighborhood to span across what had been the City / Township Limit Line.

**WHAT HAPPENS AT A NEIGHBORHOOD PLANNING COUNCIL MEETING?**

The Neighborhood Planning Councils each meet once a month, at 7:00 p.m. They generally meet at a local neighborhood elementary school or church facility, and meetings typically last one and one half to two hours. While attendance varies with the neighborhood, and the issue being discussed, most of the meetings have 10-25 members and guests present. The meetings are usually well organized, with a set agenda.

Neighborhood Councils annually elect officers, with the Chairperson being responsible for running the meeting. A member takes the minutes. Minutes and agendas are available on the City website.

There is a set agenda but each Council determines its own goals. Council leadership often arranges for guest speakers to talk and educate about community topics. Each council has its own personality and list of priorities. However, housing code compliance, crime and zoning enforcement are high priority issues in most of the council areas.

A City representative from the Community Services Department is assigned to each Neighborhood Planning Council and someone attends each of the monthly meetings. They listen to the councils concerns, and help provide feedback information to the council. The representative will also provide a Code Report for that council’s area each month. The City Police Department provides a representative to attend each Neighborhood Planning Council meetings. Representatives from other departments make themselves available to the councils when requested.

City Commissioners receive the Agendas and Minutes for all of the monthly Neighborhood Planning Councils meetings. They attend as many of the Planning Council meetings as their schedule allows them. During the meetings they listen to the concerns of the council and provide as much information possible.

The Police Department sends a representative familiar with the neighborhood who reports on monthly police activities in their area. In fact, for several years in the late 1970's the Neighborhood Planning Councils also served the dual role as POLICE COMMUNITY RELATIONS forums, where police officers could better understand neighborhood priorities and residents could work with police on neighborhood safety issues.

Other public and nonprofit agencies also frequently use these meetings to disseminate information about their projects and activities.

One of the most useful purposes that is served by the Neighborhood Planning Council is to serve as a first opportunity for developers to gauge the feelings of nearby residents for a project that they may be considering. The Planning Department always recommends that a developer contact and meet with the neighborhood Planning Council prior to the Planning Commission and City Commission deliberation on the matter. The Planning Commission and City Commission note any recommendations made by the council in considering whether to grant approval to a particular project. The developers know and understand the key role that Neighborhood Councils play in this process, and can often try to address issues raised by neighbors prior to any official public hearings.

One additional responsibility of the Neighborhood Planning Council is to recommend to the City Commission monthly nominations for the "Beautiful Battle Creek Award", given to someone who sets high standards for property maintenance in the neighborhood, and recognized monthly with the presentation of a certificate at a City Commission meeting by the Mayor.

## **HOW DO I GET INVOLVED?**

The simplest way to become involved would be for you to attend a meeting --- see if it's something you want to be a part of and ask to be a member. Almost all of the councils have available slots for new members, and they would more than welcome your participation.

If you are not sure what Neighborhood Planning Council area you are in, you can call the Community Development Department at 966-3315, we can give you the time, date and place for the next meeting for the Neighborhood Planning Council in your area.

## **WHY SHOULD I GET INVOLVED?**

Many American cities are at a crossroads. One road leads to further deterioration and continuing out migration. To travel this road, a city needs only to ignore the problems of local residential areas and exclude citizens from participating in planning decision that affect the quality of neighborhood live. This will ensure that residents with the means to do so will move to other locations, and the decline will continue.

The other road leads to healthy, stabilized and improved local neighborhoods that will hold existing residents and attract new ones. To travel this road, a city must address the local problems experienced by residents on a day-to-day basis, which influence confidence, attachment, and commitment to an area and to the city as a whole.

To travel this second road, citizens must also be identifying problems and designing solutions. Our experience has demonstrated time and again that citizen involvement is a necessary ingredient of successful neighborhood revitalization and stabilization. All of the money and labor will go for naught if local residents are not involved in

maintaining and committed to preserving and improving improvements once they are made. Participation is an essential ingredient of commitment, and our Neighborhood Planning Councils are well suited for encouraging participation.

The City of Battle Creek has historically shown a remarkable interest in improving the quality of life in our neighborhoods. Are there still problems? ----- absolutely.

But -----

***“A successful city neighborhood is a place that keeps sufficiently abreast of its problems so that it is not destroyed by them.”***

There are dedicated, caring people serving on all of our Neighborhood Councils. Because of its neighborhood involvement, many of our Planning Council members ultimately become involved on other City boards or commissions.

If you gain nothing else from the experience, you will gain some new friends --- friends who share many of the same dreams for healthy neighborhoods as you, and those friends will be your neighbors.