

Neighborhood Marketability

Remarks by Marcia Nedland for the TNT Neighborhood Summit

I've worked in one way or another with groups across the country trying to revitalize neighborhoods for nearly 20 years. My particular emphasis has been on marketing because that's where my training is, and I think I've figured out a few things that could be useful to people thinking about making their neighborhoods more marketable. I'd like to take a few minutes to share them with you, and then have the panel tell you about their work in four Syracuse neighborhoods.

1. It's important to understand how a neighborhood got to where it is if we are going to change its future.

Why do neighborhoods decline? Every neighborhood has its individual story, but a few things affect lots of declining neighborhoods. First, nearly all American cities have experienced a movement of people from the city to the suburbs. This movement was facilitated by many things, but significantly by our own government through the building of highways and FHA financing targeted at suburbs, and by the self-interest of the people who moved - self-interests that ran the gamut from racism to a desire to move up to a bigger, lower-maintenance home and yard.

What does this have to do with city neighborhoods? Neighborhoods have people moving into them and moving out of them all the time – the visible problems often start when neighbors who move out fail to be replaced by new neighbors who care about and invest in the neighborhood's future. For example, let's say Mrs. Jones, who's been a homeowner in the neighborhood for 50 years, needs to move into a nursing home. In a healthy neighborhood, Mrs. Jones' adult children would move into her home or a new family would buy it and live there. In many urban neighborhoods, what began to happen is that Mrs. Jones' kids wanted to live in the suburbs, so they tried to sell the house. Often, either they couldn't sell it, and so rented it out, or they could only sell to a landlord who rented it out.

Property values begin to stagnate and even decline. Tax revenue based on home values falls. The city has less money with which to provide services such as police, fire, code enforcement. Some owners begin to withhold investment in their homes because it doesn't seem worth it. Business follows its customers to the suburbs. Building conditions decline, vacancies and crime increase, and at some point city neighborhoods have a reputation as being a place for people who can't go to the suburbs. And the cycle continues. Which leads me to #2.

2. Our neighborhoods are competing with the suburbs and other healthy neighborhoods.

The decline in our neighborhoods can only be reversed if we reinvent them to compete effectively with the suburbs and other healthy neighborhoods. Why? Because our neighborhoods need homebuyers, renters and other investors to move in, stay, and invest their time, money and energy in maintaining the neighborhood. Right now, people of all

incomes and all races are moving out of most cities more than they are moving in. If we don't reverse this tide, we don't stand a chance at revitalization.

3. The most important thing healthy neighborhoods have that declining neighborhoods don't is confidence.

This is so important. When neighbors are confident in the future of the neighborhood, they plant flowers, mow their lawn, go to community meetings, talk to each other – they replace the roof instead of just putting on another layer. They put in a pretty front door instead of the cheapest door possible. When they are not confident, they start to hold back their money, their time, their energy. They talk about the neighborhood in ways that don't encourage others to live there. They may even move out. Business and government react the same way.

And reinvestment isn't just about affordability. I've seen many, many affordable loan programs languish because people weren't confident enough in the neighborhood to fix up.

4. Successful revitalization strategies understand and create symbols of confidence.

A key to restoring confidence and increasing a neighborhood's marketability is to understand what things inspire confidence in current investors (such as homeowners and landlords) and potential investors (homebuyers, renters) and to create those symbols. When I work in a neighborhood, I ask people "How would you know things are getting better?" In most neighborhoods I've worked in, some common answers include new homebuyers (including people who are not low-income), people fixing up, rising home values, a feeling of safety, adherence to some common standards (no loitering, no trash, homes maintained, etc.), and positive portrayal in the media. All of these things can be created through incentives of various kinds, neighborhood leadership and marketing.

(By the way, in a neighborhood revitalization game I use in revitalization classes, almost every group I've ever had has identified "lots of trees and green space" as the number one thing they like about their ideal neighborhood. Maybe this means we should be investing more in that aspect of our neighborhoods.)

Whatever those symbols are for your neighborhood, you need to focus your strategies on creating, cultivating and marketing them until the confidence level turns and becomes self-fulfilling. My number one question for any new program or idea is "What impact will it have on confidence in the future of the neighborhood?"

5. We have to talk the talk!

I am amazed at how often we shoot ourselves in the foot when we talk about our neighborhoods, especially to the media. Community groups in general are used to talking about problems in the neighborhood so they can get funding and support to fix the problems. But when we do this, we are reinforcing in the public's mind that there are

problems in our neighborhood. In my own town of Ithaca, I just read in the paper a huge pull-quote from our building commissioner stating that people are “tired of Ithaca looking like a garbage dump!” Good heavens! This certainly makes me feel proud of living there.

I watched the Syracuse news one evening a couple of months ago and saw a string of really horrible messages about city neighborhoods, perpetrated by neighbors as well as reporters. There was a story featuring neighbors in one place complaining about the quality of their playground equipment, with tape of awful, rundown playgrounds. The neighbors meant well, but reinforced that their neighborhood is a place of last choice. In that same broadcast, one news anchor reported on a new loan program for homebuyers in the city, while the other newscaster expressed doubt that it would inspire anyone to move into the city! We have to exercise some discipline about what we say, or we will continue to be part of the problem.

6. Making people jump through hoops that don't benefit the neighborhood is counterproductive.

This drives me crazy. Most of the big federal funding programs (like CDBG, Low-Income Housing Tax Credits and HOME) for housing have rules created to provide affordable housing, not to revitalize neighborhoods. When we use those programs exclusively for our neighborhoods, we are saddled with hoops that people have to jump through in order to get a rehab loan or to buy a house in a neighborhood most people don't want to live in anyway. There are income restrictions, family-size restrictions, resale restrictions, geographic restrictions, limits on how nice your home improvement can be, etc., etc.

Our goal is to get people fixing up, to a standard that inspires confidence in the future of the neighborhood, and to get people of a variety of incomes to buy homes or rent apartments in the neighborhood. Why make it difficult for them to do that? We need to cultivate sources of funding that do not have restrictions to combine with our common federal sources so that we can accomplish our goals for neighborhoods.

7. It is important to measure progress toward outcomes, rather than activities.

A strategy is only good if it is helping to achieve the outcomes you want – like more residents, fewer vacant buildings, improved building conditions, rising home values, a greater sense of safety, and greater confidence in the future. If you aren't measuring these things, you could be doing a lot of activities without getting to where you want. You have to be willing to stop or change a program if it isn't doing what you thought it would do.

Thank you, and good luck with your neighborhood marketability.