

## **2011 NCSHA Annual Awards for Program Excellence**

Category: Special Achievement

HFA: Nebraska Investment Finance Authority

### **Entry Name: “Agent of Change-The Role of the HFA”**

**Introduction to the Issue:** Can HFA’s be more than superb program administrators? Can they be agents of substantial community change across 400 city blocks? The story of NIFA’s role in North Omaha is one of challenge, encouragement and support. After 20 years of piecemeal progress, NIFA threw down a \$10 million “challenge” for substantial change. NIFA encouraged the community to “Dream Big Dreams.” Throughout the process NIFA supported the participants with funding and technical support. The “Agent of Change” role for NIFA was new ....and risky!

**The Community and the Challenge.** From its earliest beginnings, North Omaha was the commercial, social, cultural and political heart of Nebraska’s African American community. Civil rights leader Malcolm X was born in North Omaha. The North Omaha Dreamland Ballroom played host to jazz great Preston Love, who hailed from North Omaha, as well as the likes of Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Lionel Hampton, Louis Armstrong and Nat King Cole. Sports Hall of Famers Bob Gibson and Gayle Sayers grew up in North Omaha. Prior to 1968, North Omaha was a vibrant community. Then there were riots and fires...and the community entered a spiral of decline.

After 1968, the 400 city block “village” of North Omaha suffered significant population loss and disinvestment. The civil unrest of the 60s, continuing racism, despair and distrust turned the once vibrant hopes and dreams of North Omaha residents into nightmares and a feeling of hopelessness. Census data completed in 2006 indicated that among America's 100 largest metro areas, Omaha has the third-highest black poverty rate and the highest percentage of black children living in poverty. Six of 10 North Omaha black children live below the poverty line. The unemployment rate for blacks living in North Omaha exceeds 11 %, three times that of the rest of the city. The well known outcomes of poverty and despair – extreme violence, outmigration and disinvestment became the “new normal”. The city began to accept the fact that there were “two Omahas”... Omaha and “North Omaha”.

**The Beginning of a Multiyear Process.** NIFA began the process with a \$10 million dollar challenge! The NIFA Board offered to provide up to \$10 million dollars to create a \$30 million dollar trust fund for the rejuvenation of North Omaha. The business and community leaders immediately responded by asking “If we had \$30 million dollars... what would we do with it?” In response, starting in 2006, NIFA teamed with the Omaha Chamber of Commerce, African American business leaders, corporate leaders, elected officials and the North Omaha community in an unparalleled alliance of public, corporate and community interests. This group initiated the North Omaha Development Project (the “NODP”). To kick-start the pre-planning process, NIFA contributed \$75,000 from general operating funds to raise \$750,000 from private sources. This pre-plan effort was to develop a base line of information and to specifically identify the challenges in North Omaha. A traditional analysis of the strengths, weaknesses and opportunities for revitalization in North Omaha was performed and a fulltime professional was hired to oversee development of opportunities identified through this process. NIFA’s Executive Director, Tim Kenny, and NIFA Board Member, Michael Maroney along with Director of Programs, Ted Simpson, were instrumental in this effort serving on the initial Executive and Steering committees.

Those involved with the NODP produced a basic outline for the economic development of North Omaha, publishing “*A Strategy for Community Investment*” (the “SCI Plan”). The SCI Plan recommended building from strengths on the neighborhood edges, transforming the image of North Omaha at its core and spreading the momentum in directed ways throughout the neighborhoods. The SCI Plan, completed

in October 2007, represented the first ever comprehensive economic study of North Omaha. (*See NODP SCI Plan on attached disc.*)

**Getting Down to Ground Level.** While providing significant information and overall guidance on the redevelopment and opportunities for North Omaha, the SCI Plan provided a lofty view from a “30,000 foot elevation”. The Plan was great, but who was going to break it down into actionable steps? While conversations continued, there was a dearth of ideas for what was to occur “next.” Not content to sit by idly, NIFA began to stimulate and “spark” action by encouraging the community to take the SCI Plan to “Ground Level” and lay out an action plan. NIFA partnered with Alliance Building Communities, Inc. (“ABC”), a 501(c) (3) corporation comprised of three established North Omaha non-profit organizations, to launch the next phase of the effort.

To fund the “*ground level*” tactical implementation of the SCI Plan’s recommendations, NIFA led “field trips” to various cities to learn from successful and unsuccessful efforts. Then NIFA and ABC each contributed \$181,000 to select and fund planning professionals. The RFP for the professionals required the applicants to identify and develop action plans for the creation of *five (5) iconic and transformational development projects within the SCI Plan’s targeted development opportunity areas*. Respondents were asked to identify high density, mixed and affordable income residential uses (both homeownership and rental), as well as retail, institutional, educational and manufacturing (jobs) uses. NIFA and ABC requested proposals for projects that would have a transformational impact upon the identified neighborhoods. These projects/designs would have to dramatically improve the quality of life in the North Omaha and serve as powerful catalysts for increasing public/private investment in five key targeted areas. (*See RFP on disc.*)

**It Takes a Village AND an HFA.** Two planning consultants were engaged. Soon it became clear to NIFA that we needed a North Omaha organization to facilitate and coordinate the effort. Enter the Empowerment Network, a “grass roots” organization that had been working to address crime and social issues in North Omaha. NIFA provided the Empowerment Network with a three-year capacity grant of \$25,000/year (NIFA’s Outreach Partnership Program) and a two-year technical assistance grant of \$100,000/year, in each case matched by philanthropic sources. Working through the Empowerment Network, NIFA and ABC funded the community-wide “Village Revitalization Plan”. As best expressed by Shirley Franklin, former mayor of Atlanta, during a May 20, 2011 visit to Omaha and meeting with NIFA, the Empowerment Network and Empower Omaha Partners, “*I have not seen this level of community organization and planning in any community I’m familiar with, not in my 25 years of public service.*”

**Breaking it Down to Size-The Village Revitalization Plan.** The Village Revitalization Plan, in two years of intense work, meshed the ideas of internationally recognized planning consultants, executive and advisory committees, key stakeholders in the North Omaha community and more than 500 residents (including school children). The goal? Align the aspirations of the North Omaha Community with the reality of the area’s development potential. Those living and working in the community were deeply involved in the public process to define, and then further refine, the concepts put forth by the development consultants. The result was a clear vision of realistic, implementable concepts, supported by the entire community, providing a clear blueprint for the re-construction of North Omaha over the next 30 years. The Village Revitalization Plan, released in April 2011, focused on four areas (*see VRP Executive Summary and VRP Final Plan on attached disc*):

Malcolm X Memorial Birthplace & International Center/Adams Park – The Plan calls for the creation of a destination for local, regional and international visitors by expanding and building

on the work of the Malcolm X Foundation and working closely with the City Parks Department on development plans for Adams Park.

16<sup>th</sup> and Cuming Streets – In this threshold, or gateway, between North Omaha and downtown, the recommendation is to create a sport and entertainment-themed space, building on the market-driven development that is taking place just north of downtown Omaha.

24<sup>th</sup> and Lake Streets – Building on the rich history of this area, the Plan recommends the creation of an arts, cultural, and entertainment district, the central anchor of which will be creation of a Festival/Market Square. The district will include both civic and cultural attractions, restaurants, retail, mixed-used buildings, and mixed income housing.

30<sup>th</sup> and Lake/Parker Streets – The focus for this area is the creation of an “urban village” that builds on existing core assets. The Salem Baptist Church, Charles Drew Health Center, Miami Heights housing development and the offices of the Urban League anchor this area. The capture and clearing of a crime-ridden public housing project creating 20+ acres of open land was a huge accomplishment: it offers a blank canvas for the development of mixed-income housing, mixed-type housing and neighborhood services replacing an area formerly referred to as a “war zone”.

The Village Revitalization Plan is a physical “blueprint” that allows and defines a new, sustainable community. The clarity and detail of the Village Plan has attracted new interest from the philanthropic community. Significant efforts are already underway in the areas of reducing unemployment, changing education systems and encouraging youth development projects. Housing and neighborhood development and health/well-being being projects for North Omaha families are being integrated with violence prevention and intervention efforts. The Village Plan is the framework on which all the efforts are attached. The Plan is accelerating the transformation of North Omaha into a great place to live, raise a family, do business, play, worship and learn.

**“Buy-In” by the City of Omaha.** The final Village Revitalization Plan now has statutory “authority” and is the definitive plan for the future of North Omaha. The Village Plan was unanimously approved by the City of Omaha Planning Board and thereafter unanimously adopted by the City Council on July 12, 2011. Described by one Council member as the most important piece of legislation in the city’s history, its status as part of the City’s Master Plan ensures that the hours of effort by all involved will not end up “on the shelf”.

**The “New” Vision and Plan for North Omaha.** With more than 500 individuals participating in the process, NIFA’s “Agent of Change” role was that of Challenger, Funder and Cheerleader. NIFA stepped forward when momentum was needed with financial resources, technical assistance, tactical advice, words of encouragement and relationship building lunches at “Big Mama’s.” The product of the five year effort is an attainable, community-driven, fully supported plan for infrastructure projects, large-scale private investment and public-private development partnerships. The Village Revitalization Plan has 5 phases. It will guide \$1.4 billion in new investments, attracting 6,000 new residents and the businesses to serve them.