

The Plan's Foundation: *Discovery Phase Findings*

The discovery phase of this plan involved input from neighbors via public meetings, input from other stakeholders via individual interviews, a review and analysis of the resident survey (which was developed and implemented prior to this planning process), and a review of organizational documents provided by VECA.

Overall Major Findings

The following themes emerged from the discovery phase:

- All inputs (neighborhood meetings, survey responses, and interviews) indicated that VECA has a solid reputation as a stable, caring organization made up of volunteers that get things done. Although the survey did reveal that some neighbors believe VECA to be an organization that is a closed society - one that doesn't welcome new volunteers. However, this doesn't appear to be the predominant perception.
- VECA is known for having long-term committed and effective leaders (as discovered in both the interviews and the survey). This is perceived as both a strength and weakness. To some, veteran leadership is the very foundation of VECA's success and to some it represents a danger to VECA's future stability (with eventual leader burn out) and, at the negative extreme, there is a perception by a few that these leaders are gatekeepers.
- The desire and need for greater neighbor involvement was a major theme appearing in all input sources. While VECA is applauded for being a true grassroots organization, having greater numbers of active neighbors working on a variety of projects is seen as a key to greater neighborhood improvement.
 - The question becomes then, how does the organization nimbly respond to the passion and energy of neighbors? How does the organization keep its virtual doors wide open to surface neighbors who will become truly engaged? What tools will help in that effort?
- Working with other neighborhood associations appears to be a priority. This emerged from the neighborhood meetings, in the context of events such as the idea for an art fair with Crosstown, some interviews, and in the survey.
- There appears to be a call for exploration of a couple of institutional partnerships – one with the City of Memphis and one with Rhodes College to determine the future involvement with the College.

Major Findings from the Neighborhood Quadrant Meetings

Four neighborhood meetings were held, one in each quadrant of the neighborhood. The goals of the meetings were:

- For neighbors to meet neighbors and discuss the future of their neighborhood.
- For neighbors to individually identify how they would like to be involved.

Southwest quadrant had 30 participants; Northeast had 18 participants; Northwest had 20 participants; and Southeast had 15 participants. Neighbors worked in groups to brainstorm ideas for VECA activities/goals that correspond with current topic areas/committees: Communications/Fundraising/Events, Grassroots Involvement, Natural Environment, Built Environment, and Safety. Then, for each topic area, they posted their groups' two or three best ideas alongside of the current activities VECA committees are conducting in those areas (which were written on large pieces of flip chart paper).

Each neighbor got to vote for the three activities/goals they think are the most important by placing red dot next to the activity/goal. Furthermore, if they are willing to work on the item(s) they voted for, they placed a check mark on star on their red dot.

The main themes were:

- *Connecting neighbors to neighbors.* Ideas vary from block club organization, neighborhood watches, community gardens, “get to know your neighbor” with community profiles, and neighborhood sports teams.
- *Welcoming new neighbors to the neighborhood.* Ideas included by giving them packets about VECA, welcome baskets, block captain welcome, etc.
- *Develop activities for youth.* Ideas included after-school programs, getting them involved in volunteering at the Greenline, projects to help youth fulfill volunteer requirements for school, and youth get together with youth from the various neighborhood churches.
- *Developing and marketing a consistent VECA identity.*
- *Partnering with arts organizations for fundraisers.* For example, a Christmas festival with Crosstown.

For several reasons (modest meeting attendance, the long lists of ideas generated, and the fact that some attendees didn't vote) there was no activity/goal that got a large number of votes with stars on them (indicating that neighbors like the idea *and* are personally willing to work on the idea). However, the following ideas received from 3-5 starred votes each:

- Developing Greenline activities (like concerts and events)
- Developing and stabilizing block clubs
- Strengthening “institutions” at the edge of the neighborhood (Cabanas, Sears Tower, etc)
- Placing speed bumps
- Developing neighborhood watches

Lenses To View the Work Through

The VECA planning committee was presented with several lenses with which to view the planning process through. Some were developed in conversations with the planning committee, some emerged during the neighborhood meetings, and some were submitted by the strategic planning consultant (Shannon MB Dixon) for their consideration:

- What work/activities compel neighbors to get actively engaged in neighborhood betterment (self determination), as opposed asking VECA to provide “services?”
- How can VECA respond nimbly to diverse issues/ideas that neighbors bring to the table (when the neighbors have energy and passion around the issue)? It is notable that different quadrants seem to have different personalities (different leadership styles, different ideas of neighborhood activities and needs).
- What promotes neighbor attachment to the neighborhood? Why do people stay in the neighborhood and work to make it the neighborhood they want it to be?
- For neighborhood leaders, what VECA activities add energy to your work and which ones suck the energy out of the room?