

Demise of Neighborhood Agency A Troubling Loss

Burton Street runs a long block from Homestead to Albany avenues in Hartford's Upper Albany neighborhood. It's lined with the large, boxy Queen Anne houses popular in a century ago when the city was expanding to the west.

The working-class street held its own for a long time. But in the early years of this decade, Burton Street began to look worn and shabby. Not so today. More than a dozen rusted chain-link fences were removed, overgrown bushes were cut back, sidewalks were rebuilt, houses were painted, porches were repaired.

The street looks much better today. Some of the houses are stunning.

The work was part of a revival philosophy implemented by a nonprofit group called Neighborhoods of Hartford Inc. The idea was to build from strength, to stabilize and strengthen middle-tier neighborhoods, which might then improve adjoining areas.

It seemed like sound thinking, and it seemed to be working. Thus it is deeply disappointing to learn that Neighborhoods of Hartford has gone out of business.

Executive director Donald J. Poland confirmed that the agency was being dissolved, but would not comment further. Sources close to the situation say a large part of the problem was a drop-off in private fundraising. That may well be, but it's at least curious that Mayor Eddie Perez didn't step in to keep the agency afloat.

This poor city has seen a lot of well-intended renovation efforts fail. Too often, someone would build or renovate housing in a blighted neighborhood, only to see the buildings ruined again by the surrounding crime and poverty.

The new approach, called Healthy Neighborhoods, was developed and successfully implemented by planners David Boehlke and Marta Howell in Battle Creek, Mich., in the 1990s. It looked down the other end of the telescope.

The theory is to start in urban neighborhoods that may be fragile but still register a pulse — in other words, have a real estate market. Help those residents improve their properties, neighborhood amenities and public spaces, get them engaged in neighborhood activities, and pretty soon more people are investing and fixing up on adjoining blocks, and then the tables are turned and restoration is pushing out blight.

Hartford's project came out of the mayor's homeownership task force in 2002. The project began the following year with five cluster areas called Rising Star Blocks and 12 smaller Pride Blocks. There were meetings, neighborhood gatherings and projects, and loans for a whole host of improvement projects. A designer on the agency's staff worked with owners.

I kept an eye on this from time to time, and it always seemed to be making steady, incremental progress. I recall Neighborhoods of Hartford Inc. installed residential outdoor lighting on a street in the North End, to great effect. When the agency had an annual dinner and awards ceremony, more than 350 people showed up.

The agency received both public and private support. Mayor Perez said the problem was that the nonprofit failed to maintain its external fundraising. "They started out great and kept going until they ran into fundraising problems," he said.

Perez said he's talking to other agencies about taking over some of the functions performed by Neighborhoods of Hartford Inc.

Apparently some national funders backed out, for reasons unrelated to the project. Perez said the agency didn't come to the city to for more funds to make up the difference.

I know there are other pressing needs, but it remains somewhat puzzling that the city didn't step in to keep Neighborhoods of Hartford Inc. going. The city keeps encouraging the construction of more and more new low-income housing. That's where the federal money is. But the folks in the Rising Star and Pride block areas are working homeowners. These are people the city desperately needs. Wouldn't you want to keep them happy? I'm told it would have taken an investment of perhaps \$300,000 to keep the program going.

I hope the mayor didn't let this program go because it wasn't splashy enough. That would have been the very reason to keep it. Steady progress over time is how cities turn around. There's no ribbon-cutting for a rebuilt porch, but a new porch or yard can make a big difference for a homeowner.

Hartford has too often fallen for "big bang" thinking. I hope that wasn't the case here.

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Response by Aldwin Allen

NHI has been the only organization that has directly funded the efforts of the home owners on Burton Street in such a specific manner. We have enjoyed good steady success refreshing twenty of the twenty-eight homes on this block. In addition to the great points you made in your article, NHI have created opportunities for residents to bond across streets, neighborhoods and towns. Through working with NHI my family as well as others have met and become friends with some great people. The connections range from Lyme Street, Ridgefield Street, Deerfield Street, the south end, west end and West Hartford.

There is something special about what this program has allowed the residents of Burton Street to do. This street is much better off because of NHI and many other contributing agencies. In the process of taking care of our homes we got an opportunity to take care of each other. I am not sure what our leaders classify as success. But, in the last ten years I count what has been done on this street as just that, a success. Burton Street was known as Da Jungle in the early nineties as a haven for illicit activity today it isn't. Now people from other areas come and look at the homes and landscapes in the same way Nicola, my wife, and I drive around the suburbs searching for ideas and inspiration. We have gone from the untamed jungle to a livable garden and just as we were preparing to encompass neighboring streets (we have already begun work at my mothers home on Sigourney Street last year) our partner is no longer. Hartford sees too many deaths.