

Great Neighbourhood Strengthening Ideas from Jim Diers

1. **Matched Funding** - Jim also spent 14 years leading the ground breaking “Department of Neighbourhoods” within the City of Seattle. This saw local government reorganise themselves into place based teams that supported and worked collaboratively with communities to achieve their own neighbourhood plans.

Key to enabling this was a matched funding programme – where by community effort is matched with Council funds to enable community-led action. To learn more about the various funds on offer and guidelines for how they operate see <http://www.seattle.gov/neighborhoods/nmf/>

2. **Bumping places** - the idea that neighbourhood connections and relationships are created and strengthened when people ‘bump’ into each other...the more bumps, the stronger the bonds. Corner dairies, schools, walking and bike paths, playgrounds, sports fields....what are the bumping places in your community? How can we increase opportunities for ‘bumping’?
3. **Community calls** - using the analogy of duck calls, Jim pointed out that people in our neighbourhoods won’t all respond to the same call to participate in locally-led action. Only a few will likely come to a meeting call, others need a 1-1 shoulder tap call, food/events will bring others out etc. Too often we invite others in with just one call – a meeting. We need to think about the broader range of calls required to bring everyone in our community together.
4. **Never do for communities what they can do for themselves** –by sticking to this ‘rule,’ helping agencies can model leadership and empowerment by actively stepping back and encouraging locals to step forward.
5. **Don’t let people sit on their assets** - everyone has gifts, we need to learn new ways of acknowledging these and tap into all people have to offer. At a community level, the same applies, we should be building treasure maps (community strengths) rather than needs analyses – the latter leave us firmly in deficit silos, requiring agencies to fix problems.
6. **Resident-led organisations are different** from community organisations. Community organisations are not the community. Working with residents and enabling local leadership often requires capacity building/training and working directly alongside at times to help build confidence, connections and ‘how to’ skills.
7. **There are some things ONLY communities can do** – these include: the power to care and act together about our environment and each other, respond to emergencies, prevent crime and demand social justice.

Key Themes and Stories from Jim’s Workshops around Aotearoa

1. **About Community**

- Topography assists and defines neighbourhoods, ‘place’ also generates a key sense of community.
- Good urban design/well designed places don’t automatically bring strong communities – takes more than design.



- A neighbourhood generally has around 5000 people, so there's around 100 neighbourhoods in the City of Seattle.
 - Now in Seattle, people will say what neighbourhood they're from before they'll say they're from Seattle. A real affinity/sense of connection to 'their place.'
- Many ways to define community. For Jim, it's about social relationships = about how we identify with and support and care for each other
- We can build community by:
 - Forging a common identity with those living around us
 - Working at a manageable scale (5000 people or less)
 - Ensuring there are gathering or bumping places...the more times we bump into people we build relationships. Need places/spaces/activities (formal and informal) to ensure lots of 'bumping' happens!
- Community is also a vehicle for collective action – it's also about what we do with others that we can't do by ourselves
- Many have key roles in creating and supporting communities (local govt, central govt, community groups and agencies etc)
- No substitute for local residents – and there are many things that are best done by people based in local places, there's a huge power in community that we're all realising again. For example, the power to care for the earth best resides locally – but to change outcomes for the earth, first we have to relate to/connect with it.....and often best place to do that is in the places where we live.
- An international movement underway around community-led action – it is tough work, but really important for all our futures.



2. Neighbourhood Action in Seattle

- Key to success has been a 'cash match' philosophy by the City of Seattle - a co-funding initiative where community labour and effort has been [matched by local government funding](#). This approach has helped generate 4000 projects in the last 20 years.

Example: Street tree planting in Ballard

- A community where there were no street trees applied for matched funds to change this.
- Were amazed when Council dropped off 1080 trees to be planted!
- In one day, over 1000 people came out to plant. They were hugely empowered by the process and seeing immediate results from their actions so quickly....in 24 hours Ballard became a community with tree lined streets
- Wanted to do more together so a project initiated to create a new neighbourhood park. They found some suitable land and convinced the City to buy it for a park. Locals designed and built the park, utilising many talents that existed within their community eg. landscape architects.
- Next year the group built a community garden and then moved on to assist more neighbourhoods to do the same.
- In Seattle:
 - 85 community gardens have now been designed/built by communities and there are 7000 urban gardeners, many donating local produce to foodbanks and those in need



- 20 parks have been built with and by volunteers over the last 20 years, this includes community created street furniture, skate parks, re-forestation programmes.
- Lots of creative energy and action unleashed eg. undriver licencings project to encourage people out of cars
- Now 67 sustainability action groups formed and networked– SCALLOPS (Sustainable Communities All Over Puget Sounds)



- People all over are de-discovering the importance of neighbourhoods
 - Key in times of crisis – government just can't respond fast enough
 - 80% of health outcomes are driven from within communities not hospitals eg. our mental health and wellbeing, care and support, economic drivers etc.
 - Strong communities are essential for surviving change. Putnam's [Bowling Alone](#) work showed American communities in crisis because community life had broken down eg. people too busy to volunteer, no longer belonging to service groups, sense of community traded off for privacy, helping had become a professionalised service etc.
 - Key threats to communities include
- Many involved in 'shaping places' like property investors and decision makers are located 'outside' of communities. Their decisions have helped make local people feel isolated and disempowered. We need to find new ways to include them in locally led processes so everyone moves forward together.

COMMUNITY IN CRISIS



- Single-purpose land use
- Increased mobility
- Longer work days
- Fear
- Electronic screens
- Consumerism
- Globalization
- Specialization
- Professionalization



3. Key Ingredients to inclusive and broad based participation and action:

- Many have walked away from communities because of GDAs (grim determined activists), people who are always negative, always protesting about things they don't want rather than mobilising around things they do. What gets people engaged is HOPE!
- Our traditional focus on meetings as the place of initial engagement also doesn't help things – why have a meeting when you could have a party!!
- Activities focused around fun really bring people out and together...important to encourage fun, creativity and allow people to make decisions.

Have fun!

In **Freemont**, locally-led public art projects have enabled locals to protest about their lack of public transport, vote in a troll sculpture that's become a local icon and visitor attractor, and a number of fun local festivals now bring communities together many times a year.



- Start where people are! From their block, their language and culture and make sure communications are as jargon free as possible
- People will be motivated by what matters most to them. Encourage people to follow their passions, to link across their broader networks to build momentum and look for common interests across networks.
 - Start by asking people “what do you care deeply about? What are your hopes and dreams?”
 - Don’t start anything with a ‘meeting’ call...they are highly **unlikely** to motivate or encourage participation. Need to use wide range of ‘calls’ to get a broad range of people involved
 - Shy people = won’t volunteer straight up, need to approach them 1-1, ask them to volunteer and walk alongside to build confidence
 - Social people = will respond to a party, dance, food, fun call
 - Practical people = some people want to ‘do’ rather than talk, these folks need to see results to be empowered to do more.
 - Seeing is believing, start where you will see results quickly, start small to fuel up change and participation....you’ll need this before you start work on the ‘big stuff’.
- This work isn’t just about mobilising poor communities. The reality is that it’s often harder to mobilise more affluent communities, extra outreach is generally required to enable effective engagement.
 - In a community sense, poverty not just about financial scarcity – also about a lack of relationships and meaning. Communities with money don’t automatically have strong community relationships or shared meaning/identity, in fact often the opposite is true.

In **Columbia City**, their downtown was really run down. Many local businesses had closed and crime was up. It felt unsafe and those remaining residents were really worried about the future. The local residents association wanted to do something but their membership comprised only a few people.

So, they reached out to everyone else in their wider networks rather than work through their usual community association meeting channel. They offered a free breakfast to everyone who came and shared an idea that could help revitalise downtown. They then grouped similar ideas and asked people to follow the person who had each key idea and help them make things happen. Lots did! Twelve months later the community came back to celebrate and plan the next round of actions/ideas...which included creation of:

- ‘Beat Music’: live ethnic music in local cafes which resulted in large crowds coming back into down town area – good for local businesses and brought much needed vibrancy to down town.
- A farmers market (their supermarket had closed) which brings in 2500 people to shop in the downtown area on a Wednesday night
- A Community run bike store that recycles old bikes and sells them, trains young people to fix a biked and they get presented with one when they graduate from ‘bike fixing class’
- Creatively painting up the boarded up store fronts of a block of empty shops that were an eyesore....which had a dramatic unexpected effect! That block soon became an attractor with people coming to view the murals themed on the kinds of shops locals wished were there eg .an ice cream shop....which in a year’s time were REALLY there!



- Acknowledge everyone has a gift and everyone's different combinations of head, heart, and hands are essential for community- led action to thrive:
 - Head = knowledge and ideas
 - Heart = passion and enthusiasm
 - Hands = skills, capacity to do

DON'T LET PEOPLE SIT ON THEIR ASSETS!

- Don't define people and communities by what they are missing, but by what they have. When you approach things with a needs focus it puts you straight into client/service provider relationship....this is what we need to avoid!
- Need to lift off labels – don't hide behind structures and agencies. This has to happen if we want to change the fundamental nature of our community engagement – we have to be and behave differently with work within a redefined sense of power relationships.
- Stone Soup concept key – people thought they had no food in their village but when encouraged to bring something, everyone had a contribution of food to offer that collectively created a delicious soup. The magic wasn't in the stone in the pot, it was in the gifts that people brought to it – small things that collectively work together to create something magical.
- Bringing your neighbourhood together is key. Helps by identifying your 'neighbourhood recruiter' – the person that knows everyone and all that's going on, the person who has broad networks. Often these folks have few social inhibitions and can bring people out = this is their gift! They can work magic that flyers and posters won't.

Labeled People:



- Homeless
- Unemployed
- Poor person
- Non-English speaking
- Single parent
- Addict
- Offender
- Old person
- At risk youth
- Disabled

Role of agencies and working differently:

- Specialisation and professionalization has changed the way that agencies behave and work with communities over time. Strong tendency now to do things FOR people rather than with, or to empower to them to do things for themselves...need to intentionally shift from ways of working that foster dependency on agencies.
- Golden rule: never do for people what they can do for themselves!
- Agencies need to work beyond their silo, think holistically (think whole places -place is where silos come together!), don't assume they have all the

Build your community's capacity for partnership by:

- Offering leadership training
- Assisting with outreach tools like translation
- Working with associations of all types
- Providing forums for networking
- Offering non-meeting options for engagement
- Sharing stories of successful communities
- Highlighting community strengths
- Moving beyond citizen participation to community empowerment

answers, be prepared to cut red tape to enable partnership ways of working

- Don't distract the community from its own priorities or take people's time without showing results. Move from top down to community driven where ever possible.
- If agencies start by doing a community needs analysis it's generally to work out what they can do to help, and often this is where things stop. When it's all done within an agency response frame, the responsibility/power stays with agencies to lead/create action. However, if you start by identifying assets, gifts and visions within a community and what LOCAL people can do to help achieve/change things then this leads action from a very different paradigm. It can then be about what both locals and agencies can bring to the table.
- Encourage communities to think big and don't try to manage expectations down for the sake of your agency. Risk management has become key reason why we stop communities from doing things – "risk" is often a perceived rather than real barrier...and becomes an excuse/default position for changing. There are practical ways to manage insurance liabilities, future maintenance implications etc. We need to look past the 'no' and work together to find ways for barriers around risk and health and safety etc to be broken down

In **High Point** local members of a high needs community came together to talk about what they thought would make an awesome Highpoint Community. Action ideas were brainstormed by those who attended the meeting and people encouraged to get in behind the ideas they most liked to form project teams. They started not with agency resources, but with the gifts/assets they already had within their multicultural community.

New resident-led initiatives included indoor soccer for Muslim women who couldn't play outside, fitness and line dancing classes led by locals (some organised, some instructed), a new tea and coffee house, a multicultural catering company (started through locals cooking food for the original community gathering), a new playground and a swingset.



Strengthening community relationships with local government

- Takes time to build new relationships...takes time too for people to understand how to work in new ways and for systems to change (political and bureaucratic). Don't underestimate the paradigm shift required, be patient and persistent. Help people in the system to make things happen, give them ideas and support to 'be' different.
- Requires local government to take some 'leaps of faith' and put their trust back in local people
 - Once the community genie is let out of the bottle there is no turning back!
- Department of Neighbourhoods in Seattle was based on a revolution. People were so angry with the Council. They too wanted to find new ways of engaging people.
 - Was a strategic move to organise Council by neighbourhood rather than function. Required the city's workforce to be decentralised into place based teams.
 - Required a head shift into how the City could partner and collaborate with local communities – a two way value street which took some time to find.
 - Council set up store fronts in each designated neighbourhood which was staffed by a Coordinator who worked for Jim. These folks were essentially overt double agents – their role to work together with both community and the Council.

- Changes were all made within existing budgets. Was about reconfiguring existing plans, assets and resources (staff and \$\$).
- Neighbourhood plans were first developed by local people. When neighbourhoods could show they had all stakeholders involved, they were granted \$\$ to hire their own coordinator to help them prepare their plan. Meant 10,000 people were involved in neighbourhood planning processes. Plans became a way to hold themselves and the City of Seattle accountable.
 - Some neighbourhoods even voted for additional rates increases to help achieve aspects of their plan – something the Council would never have been able to do if it had been the Council's plan!
- Matched funding for community based projects was the BEST thing that happened – enabled locals to lead, showed their time/leadership was valued by the City. For how this works see <http://www.seattle.gov/neighborhoods/nmf/documents/2012NMFGuidelinesFinal.pdf>
 - Council's \$50 million investment (over 20 years) also leveraged a further \$70million of external funding.
 - Innovation created that would have never come out of the bureaucracy! Local people were encouraged to be creative and could create their own systems for organising in ways that existing officials couldn't.

Jim's Recommended Internet Resources

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www.abcdinstitute.org
www.ourblocks.net
www.neighborpower.org
www.nurturedevelopment.ie
www.ctb.ku.edu
www.seattle.gov/don
www.thesharehood.org
www.mike-green.org
www.bankofideas.com.au

