

NEIGHBORHOOD PARTNERING PROGRAM: FROM CONSTRUCTION TO COMPLETION

Austin's Story of Building a Successful NPP and Other Examples from Around the World

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The City of Austin Public Works Department is recognized as one of the nation's top-performing municipal departments. How does Austin Public Works achieve such distinction? Through the inclusion of an innovative, project-oriented team called the Neighborhood Partnering Program (NPP) which makes municipal development services readily accessible to Austin residents. The NPP, "[...] allows citizens to partner with the City to propose small to medium scale projects on City-owned property to improve the places in which they live, work and play," (Austin Public Works Department). The program was brought into the Public Works Department in support of the Imagine Austin movement, whose slogan of making Austin "Vibrant. Visible. Connected." is exemplified by the NPP.



Justin Golbabai, the first director of the NPP took Austin's unique culture of community building to heart. The NPP is focused on bringing neighborhoods together to design and construct community projects created almost entirely by people living in partnering neighborhoods. The program assists and empowers communities to bring projects from concept to construction in

12 to 18 months with cost-sharing offered. Golbabai describes the NPP as being similar to Wikipedia, as the process is entirely collaborative and allows ideas from all members of given communities to help bring projects to fruition. He describes the program as being the bridge between expert knowledge and inspired community members, helping the concepts from all community members become part of what is created with the help of the program.

Just as the NPP offers collaborative building, it also offers collaborative cost-share funding options. Financing from the community can be come as cash contributions, in-kind labor valued at \$24.66/hour, professional in-kind labor valued at the rate by which non-profits value volunteer hours, donations of materials and tools, and as maintenance credit. Grants may also be included in cash contributions for cost-share as long as the grant organization authorizes the grant for such a use. The general breakdown of cost-share funding comes to the City of Austin covering approximately 69% of all NPP projects, while communities cover a mere 31% of the cost of projects.

Check out the webinar the Alliance hosted last year on this cutting edge placemaking program at <http://ondemand.transformgov.org/store/seminar/seminar.php?seminar=86831>.

The NPP project lifecycle was described by Golbabai as a simple 6-step process. First, the neighborhood must rally around the desired project. Second, community leaders should contact NPP staff. Third, a project application showing devotion from the community towards the project must be submitted. Following submission, step four is receiving approval from the NPP as well as the project agreement. Step five begins and completes construction for the project in a 12 to 18 month period, and the sixth step is to celebrate the project and enjoy. Several NPP project completion events have even had the Austin mayor in attendance.

Projects which the NPP takes on tend to be those which would otherwise be determined as being outside the realm of what the municipality can handle. Golbabai discussed one such project: improvements made to EM Franklin Avenue, a straight and wide residential street long enough for people to regularly speed on. Residents of the community surrounding this street felt that it was ill-planned and endangered

community members, and initially requested that the city re-structure the street to help slow traffic by putting it on a road diet. This style of street is exemplified by [SEA street](#) in Seattle which was built by a program similar to Austin's NPP. SEA Street, completed in 2001, involved a complete reconstruction of a once-wide, straight neighborhood street which lacked proper drainage for stormwater as well as proper pedestrian access. Seattle Public Utilities re-constructed this street using the Street Edge Alternatives (SEA) project, including community members in the process through requiring adjacent property owners to contribute in the maintenance of the improved road. The program Seattle used to build this street is similar to Austin's NPP in that it allows for collaboration and cost-sharing from members of the associated community.

In Austin, EM Franklin Avenue was initially fitted for speed bumps by the municipal government, but residents were not satisfied with such a result. Yet, projects such as this which are out of the general realm of the municipality are rarely taken on by the city, especially without complete plans (which the general resident does not likely have the capacity to offer). Residents of the community surrounding EM Franklin Avenue learned this lesson and instead approached the NPP with their project, which recommended community members to take a summer school course at the University of Texas at Austin School of Architecture. Following the summer program, residents of the neighborhood came back to the NPP with a full-fledged Green Street-style design. While the design residents came up with was still too expensive for the NPP to complete, seeing the devotion to such a project the NPP was able to help the community install municipal art, bicycle lanes, rain gardens, trees, and a sidewalk to the street, putting EM Franklin Avenue on a cost-effective road diet. Community projects to which residents prove their devotion are those which are taken on by the NPP, as community involvement is the key to proving that projects will create lasting effects on neighborhoods.

Other cities scattered throughout the United States have programs which work towards similar goals to that of the NPP, although Austin's NPP program is the most comprehensive. One such program is the "[GrowSouth](#)" program in Dallas, Texas. This initiative works towards strengthening South Dallas neighborhoods through helping citizens volunteer and stay well-informed regarding issues which affect Southern Dallas, all while contributing towards keeping South Dallas safe and clean. The initiative builds partnerships throughout communities in which residents help in the painting of disabled people's homes, tree planting, mural painting, and through community garden cleanup and planting.

Austin, Texas is a unique city with a well-established culture of community building. The NPP helps to spread this culture into neighborhoods which previously would not have had the option to bring the resident's own culture into their communities. The main goal of the NPP is to empower Austin citizens through collaboration between public officials and community members. Incredibly, the NPP is run only by four people: the director, one engineer, and two Americorps VISTAs. This program exemplifies the devotion which the Austin city government has to building empowered communities and innovating through the use of positive inclusion of its residents.

[Watch the webinar](#) with NPP Director Justin Golbabai and learn more about the Austin Neighborhood Partnering Program by visiting the [Austin Public Works Webpage](#).

About the Alliance

The Alliance for Innovation is inspiring innovation to advance communities with the help of our partners Arizona State University (ASU) and the International City/County Management Association (ICMA). Guided by research and real-world experience, the Alliance impacts organizations and communities, changing the way local government performs. We are accessible and valuable to all levels of an organization.

CMAO and the Alliance for Innovation are partnered in efforts to provide members of both organizations exposure to national innovations along with sharing the innovative initiatives and projects of **OK** local governments.

The Alliance is a network of local governments driving innovation throughout their organizations. You can learn more about the Alliance for Innovation and or the joint Alliance and ICMA Knowledge Network at www.transformgov.org or contact our Regional Director, Greg Stopka at gstopka@transformgov.org.