



Tackling Gentrification in Changing Communities: Lessons for Walkability Advocates

The broad collection of organizations and projects working to address the challenges of gentrification and displacement have much to offer advocates within the America Walks network. Their work offers significant lessons to inform any organizations motivated to help ensure that all neighborhood reinvestment results in equitable development and broadly shared resources.

It is also clear that there is a continuing and perhaps increased role for neighborhood leadership and advocates in this work. They often have the best interests of a community and its residents at heart. When strategic and well organized, they can be effective bridge builders, translators, interpreters and equity champions on behalf of poor people and low-income communities.

While the forces swirling around the investments and projects that spur gentrification can be complex and intimidating, public policy makers and private investors are demonstrating a growing and increasingly more sophisticated appreciation for the power of collaborations and partnerships with local leadership and community-based organizations. This understanding is enhancing the opportunity for community advocates to take a seat at the table where decisions are influenced and made.

In pursuing this work, the following lessons from the field are worth consideration by community advocates promoting walkability:

Clarify the meaning of equity in your work and how equity applies to both the individuals you work with and the places your programs and projects happen. Clarity about equity goals helps ensure that the values and vision of broadly shared benefits will guide organizational choices and investments. Once equity is seen as an animating goal of your work, develop a compelling narrative and strategic communications plan so that this goal can be broadly shared with community partners and other collaborators going forward.

Knowledge is power, which is especially true in the face of the complex and often emotional challenges of gentrification and displacement. Any organization which

anticipates that these challenges will be relevant to its work can take advantage of the growing body of information — much of it developed for the purpose of informing community activists — that is available on line and through national leadership organizations interested in community development and change. The attached literature summary highlights some of these resources. In addition, there are groups on the ground in communities throughout the country which are facing gentrification challenges in the context of low-income neighborhoods and which can be part of a network of learning based on shared experiences for other like-minded organizations. Both their successes and failures will be instructive. It is important for advocates to become familiar with the *policy tools* most often used to address displacement threats. While walkability advocates will not need to be expert in applying them, knowing the options will help them advocate more effectively for their own ideas and interests. It will also prepare advocates to understand what they need to advocate *for*, as well as clarify what they are *against*.

Multi-sector partnerships and broad collaborations are the most effective strategies for leaders and organizations hoping to achieve and sustain community equity. This need to work broadly across fields and sectors should come naturally to walkability advocates whose own work aligns naturally with work in such disparate areas as open space and parks, community design, schools, and health promotion. Broadening these relationships to include additional organizations working in housing, community economic development, employment and training, and neighborhood stabilization will bring deep experience and expertise to any coalition in the struggle for community equity.

Invest in the individual skills and institutional capacities needed to do effective collaborative work. Although increasingly embraced as the most effective strategy for advancing equity in complex community reinvestment projects, working collectively is demanding and challenging to all, but especially to small organizations. Many advocates are practiced at being against other organizations and leaders, but less skilled at joining a multi-sector team with perhaps a shared goal but disparate ideas of how to achieve it. Often overlooked by both nonprofits and their funders, it is critical to invest in the capacity building and skill development needed by community advocates to identify and capitalize on the opportunities collaborations and partnerships provide. It is only then that they can have influence on the collaborations, and can help inform broader leadership development within low-income communities.

Good timing and time are important hallmarks of this gentrification work. Predicting and getting out in front of the forces of gentrification can make all the difference in how effective the struggle for policy solutions can be. Because even vague speculation about a large community investment can spark real estate speculation, community advocates must be both vigilant and well prepared to engage the challenges. Effective equity advocates also understand that being committed to preventing displacement is work that will be done over time and well into the future of a community. Even after displacement has been slowed and managed, the demanding work of enforcing sound policies and keeping communities diverse and stable has just begun.