

San Jose, California

Population 500,001 and Over, Strong Neighborhoods Initiative

The San Jose Strong Neighborhoods Initiative was launched in 2000 as a collaborative, resident-focused approach to improve blight-ridden neighborhoods and build strong community relationships. With its grass-roots approach to neighborhood renewal, the City and the Redevelopment Agency treated residents as partners rather than customers. The result is a lasting alliance that continues to improve the quality of life in hundreds of neglected, low-income neighborhoods.

In 19 coalitions of neighborhood groups, residents worked with the City and Agency to form Neighborhood Advisory Committees and develop Neighborhood Improvement Plans. Each plan focused on the Top Ten priorities for the area developed by residents, property owners and other stakeholders. The 19 areas are in a newly created Redevelopment Project Area that encompasses 10,456 acres of the of the 177-square-mile city and involves about 250,000 people.

The residents' Top Ten lists represented needs as diverse as the population. Projects include street repaving and streetlights, new parks and community centers, traffic calming, cleanups and home rehabilitation. The initiative also increased affordable housing and revitalized neighborhood business districts. Of the 190 initial projects, 148 have been completed and 18 more are funded and in the works.

Since 2000, \$2.7 billion in public and private funding has been invested in the 19 areas:

- *\$2 billion from private investors for 100 projects, including 5,428 new housing units and 1 million square feet of space for commercial and non-profit uses.

- * \$76 million from the City and Agency for neighborhood priorities and \$225 million for other public projects.

- * \$446 million from other public entities.

But the initiative has become much more than physical improvements. New community leaders have emerged from an educated and engaged citizenry ready to take charge of their neighborhoods' futures. The leaders generated the city's first Neighborhoods Commission aimed at providing a voice for all residents. The program's strategies also are being used in three new areas in San Jose, with the goal of expanding the program citywide. The Strong Neighborhoods Initiative has sparked interest from cities across the country and is being replicated in two of them.

San Jose (CA) Strong Neighborhoods Initiative

Building Strong Neighborhoods Through Partnerships

In the late 1990s, the City of San Jose set out to bring equity to low-income, blighted areas that lacked sufficient resources for improvement. But City leaders wanted to do more than invest money in these areas.

To build strong neighborhoods, residents, property owners and business managers would need to be partners in the effort. Their engagement needed to go far beyond giving feedback to plans presented to them.

The backdrop for this challenge was one of the most ethnically, economically and socially diverse cities in the country. In 2000, the population of about 900,000 was 36 percent white, 30 percent Latino and 26 percent Asian, with a high percentage of ethnic representation in low-income areas.

As the 10th largest U.S. city and the capital of Silicon Valley, San Jose was relatively affluent with a median household income of \$70,243. More than \$1 billion had been invested to rebuild Downtown since the mid-1980s, with new high-rise housing in the pipeline. But sandwiched in between a revitalized Downtown and newer suburban subdivisions were neighborhoods that suffered from higher crime rates, aging infrastructure, a lack of open space and little clout with City Hall.

Borrowing lessons learned from other neighborhood revitalization attempts, the City and the San Jose Redevelopment Agency launched the Strong Neighborhoods Initiative in 2000 with this purpose: Build Strong Neighborhoods by developing community leadership and working collaboratively with residents to achieve the delivery of city services and neighborhood priorities.

With the Redevelopment Agency as a partner, 19 areas were identified and legal findings of blight determined. Those areas became a newly created Project Area spanning 10,000 acres and involving nearly 250,000 people. As a Project Area, Agency tax increment funds were used to fund projects in these low-income and ethnically diverse neighborhoods along with other resources. The Project Area's Redevelopment Plan was guided by a 52-member Project Area Committee made up of residents, property owners and business leaders elected by their peers and approved by the City Council.

Organizing and Planning

The 19 areas were comprised of coalitions of neighborhood groups, some established and others newly formed. Each area was represented by a Neighborhood Advisory Committee, also called a Neighborhood Action Coalition, which worked with City and Agency staff members and

consultants to first take an inventory of their areas' assets and then develop priority projects. Though not limited in the number of projects, the program focused on each area's Top Ten in order to work with a reasonable number that could be funded relatively quickly.

The renewed civic energy among residents was apparent from the beginning.

“Letting us know that the city cared about what happened in the neighborhood, helped us care,” said Kathy Sutherland, a Neighborhood Advisory Committee member. “After years of neglect, we were encouraged to see a future for our neighborhood and believe that we had a part of shaping the future.”



For staff members and even department heads, the program started with a “rethinking” of how they did their jobs. They needed to look at each challenge from the neighborhoods *in* to City Hall, not City Hall *out* to the neighborhoods. The key to the program's success was getting everyone on board with a strong and unwavering commitment to residents' visions for their neighborhoods.

Working with consultants, each area developed a Neighborhood Improvement Plan that reflected the demographics, income, geography and commercial interests of the area as well as concepts, goals and objectives. Months of meetings and research led the groups to develop Top Ten priorities. The plans were approved by the San Jose Planning Commission and the San Jose City Council and became the framework for a new way of doing business at City Hall.

On the Staff Side

Using the Top Ten lists as an “action agenda,” the 19 Neighborhood Advisory Committees work with six Strong Neighborhood Teams of staff comprised of a team manager and representatives from the City Council offices; Planning, Building, and Code Enforcement; the Police Department; Parks, Recreation, and Neighborhood Services; and project managers for key neighborhood priorities. The Neighborhood Team Manager is supported with a combination of Community Coordinators, Development Specialists and Community Activity Workers.

This frontline team is empowered to deal directly with issues as they arise. The intent is that 80 percent of the solutions can be found and carried out at this level. The team also provided residents with a direct link to City Hall. The remaining 20 percent of issues is handled by a management team comprised of a Strong Neighborhoods Team Manager, Deputy City Manager and the Deputy Director of the Redevelopment Agency. Department directors or assistant directors also have been assigned from each department involved with Strong Neighborhoods to weigh in on relevant issues.

”I like the partnership SNI has been able to establish with the city departments,” said resident

Alofa Talivaa. “When a problem or concern arises, all we have to do is call to request that a representative attends the NAC or the Neighborhood Association meeting.”



Of the 190 Top Ten projects, 148 have been completed and another 18 are funded or are in the works. A total of \$2.7 billion in public and private funding has been invested in the 19 areas since 2000, including \$2 billion from private investors, \$76 million from the City and Agency for neighborhood priorities and \$225 million for other public projects. Other public entities, such as Santa Clara County and the Santa Clara Valley Water District, invested another \$446 million.

A more specific breakdown:

* **Affordable Housing** --\$157 million invested to create 2,667 affordable units, including \$1 million for housing in SNI neighborhoods, \$9 million for 531 housing rehabilitation projects and \$148 million for new housing developments in SNI areas.

* **Clean Neighborhoods** --\$700,000 resulted in the inspection of 92,000 parcels and the elimination of more than 14,400 blight conditions as well as generating 60 “Blight Buster” volunteers.

* **Parks and Community Centers** -- \$304 million in funds from the City and other sources helped finance more than 50 new projects, including 14 parks, 16 park improvement projects, 11 community centers, eight libraries and four trail projects.

* **Safe and Attractive Streets** -- \$36 million for street reconstruction, streetlights, street trees, traffic calming, sidewalk and pedestrian improvement projects, landscaped median islands, new sewers and storm drains and utility upgrades.

* **Vital Business Districts** -- \$3 million for façade and streetscape improvements, strengthening business associations and connecting businesses to resources. SNI areas showed a significant increase in property values.

The investment – and the momentum – continues. Each area has or is working on renewing its priority lists. Called Renewing the Action Agenda, the new phase involves reviewing what has been accomplished, reaffirming the community’s vision and determining the direction for the next three to five years. For many of the areas, most of the Top Ten projects have been completed, for others, priorities shifted as neighborhood conditions changed. The process also is aimed at re-energizing the neighborhood leadership.

At the same time, the City is moving toward expanding the Strong Neighborhoods Initiative citywide. In 2006, the City Council approved spending \$5.7 million in three pilot areas that are using the same methods to identify assets, needs and priorities in their areas. These areas are developing their Top Ten priorities.

And partnerships continue to grow. A recent collaboration between one of the areas, Five Wounds/Brookwood Terrace, and San Jose State University has created CommUniverCity, which has brought students and faculty into the area for a host of community-identified projects that focus on education, health and neighborhood environment.

Developing New Leaders

Beyond the financial investment, the initiative spawned a new generation of neighborhood and community leaders, some of whom went on to join the Planning Commission, lead citywide task forces and influence City Council policy decisions. Others continue to work with the Initiative, organizing cleanups, forming new neighborhood associations and strengthening the city-resident partnerships.

“SNI has been instrumental in mobilizing a new generation of increasingly sophisticated and dedicated neighborhood activists,” said Don Gagliardi, a Neighborhood Action Coalition member.



The leaders also were responsibility for generating a new effort in civic engagement – San Jose’s first Neighborhoods Commission. The 30-member advisory group is the city’s first to be elected from each of the city’s 10 council districts rather than appointed by council members and will provide a citywide voice for residents.

The program has gotten attention from across the country and is being replicated in two areas -- Stockton, CA, and Arlington, Texas. In both cities, Strong Neighborhood Initiatives are making progress in raising the quality of life for residents. Dozens of groups also have visited San Jose to learn about the program, and calls and email requests for information are frequent.

“The Strong Neighborhoods Initiative program is making real change to the physical and economic landscape , as well as community leadership,” states a report by Seifel Consulting Inc. prepared for the Redevelopment Agency. “SNI is more than the value of investment, the number of priority projects completed. It is beyond changes in resident engagement and enthusiasm, community cohesion and leadership capacity. Taken alone, each of these factors is important, but it is the cumulative impact that is fundamentally changing SNI Neighborhoods.”

