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Community Development: Self-help Approach

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Black Votes Matter
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Black Lives, Black Poverty and Black Votes Matter

Community Development: Self-help Approach

Community Development has been part of much of my adult life. While I played roles in the process, I never have been part of the core development itself, but a resource to those who were. In Chicago I was a researcher and consultant in the definition and assembly of the collateral” (land) around O’Hara Airport for Mayor Harold Washington (Chicago’s first black Mayor) The controversial idea was to develop underutilized land around the airport into vast industrial, retail and housing complex. In Atlanta I was Commissioner of Planning for the City, at the beginning of then Mayor Andrew Young’s, vision to develop a high crime and decayed area in downtown, to a vibrant downtown entertainment, bar and restaurant district for locals and city visitors. Now called the “Underground”. My central point here is that the approach to use for these developments could not be plucked from a hat, each possessed different assets, social capital and requirements. While understanding the optional approaches to development that can be achieved, determining the correct one to apply to community development is the most difficult challenge and should consume the first steps. The Community must be a major player for its own self-help and determination.

Today a great part of my attention is to serve as advocate, activist, a voice for community based development in North Omaha. It is my conviction that a self-help (determination) approach is critical to a development that will serve the community’s best interest.

With that said, a Self-help Approach for North Omaha comes with some unique and challenging impediments. There is no question that North Omaha has some major assets that can potentially provide for a tremendous development:

- Contiguous land for development
- Low and devalued land available for minimum capital outlets.
- Current zoning allowing for, housing, commercial, light industrial, retail
- African American Historical sectors
- African American Cultural sectors
- Major local and national landmarks
- Traditions of annual North Omaha Events

North Omaha also possess social capital, but currently north Omaha leadership and social capital elements are decentralized, splintered and at odds. Poverty has created a great need for centralized leadership. But an abundance of non-profits, very little community based financial power and no consensus as to a leadership “team” that could bring the development into focus.

To bring the resources necessary for deployment of development in a community like North Omaha there are dangers of diluting, if not total displacement of the assets and community people resources. A north Omaha development must benefit the community not the developers only. Keep an eye on gentrification.

A bright light maybe the **Fair Deal Village Marketplace** project, and its attempt to maintain linkage to our community history, culture and providing the much needed venue for small African American businesses and jobs. It's a beginning in the right direction.

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