

Economic Survival in the City of Neighborhoods

03: What Is a Neighborhood?

Karen Boyle: It's being in a small town right in the middle of a big city, and I think that that's what a lot of people feel in their individual neighborhoods. They belong to their neighborhood first, and that neighborhood belongs to the city.

AO'D: It's not easy to precisely define a neighborhood. A city planner might point to geographic boundaries. An academic might determine shared socioeconomic conditions. A politician might see pockets of party affiliation. For Karen Boyle, the definition of the Wallingford neighborhood has taken years of community activism and a couple of terms as its community council president.

The geographic limits of Wallingford – two lakes and two freeways – are easy to identify. In fact, many of Seattle's 113 neighborhoods have easily recognizable boundaries. Many were determined in a 1960s school-district study. Other neighborhoods' boundaries were physically imposed.

Terry Pettus and residents of the East Lake Community just have to look out their window to see two major borders – Lake Union and Interstate 5.

Pettus: Well, East Lake, in many ways, is a neighborhood that's typical, I'm sure, around the country, where a neighborhood was created by a freeway. Virtually a Chinese wall on one side and a lake on the other.

AO'D: But many neighborhoods are not so easy to define. In Seattle's South End, for instance, few landmarks distinguish borders. Rather, the entire area is defined by a sense of poverty and urban decay. In the early 1970s, a group called SESCO, Southeast Seattle Community Organization, sought to change that problem. According to early member, Jim Diers, the first step in the process was door-to-door canvassing, literally coming up with a neighborhood of common interests.

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Diers: Oh, I just knocked on doors and talked to people. Asked them what their problems were, what their concerns were, what they thought about community. It was usually really small issues that we started with. It was trying to get a stop sign at a dangerous intersection, get a vacant lot cleaned up, trying to get an abandoned house either rehabbed or torn down.

AO'D: More than other Seattle group, SESCO has modeled itself on the ideas of community organizer Saul Alinsky. One basic Alinsky concept is the use of existing community structures – churches and schools – to help define a neighborhood.

Diers: The basic principal of organizing is you start where people are at, and people who are into churches are *really* into churches. They're very committed to them; that's their community. I think oftentimes it's a more natural community than the neighborhood because the neighborhood's gone through such incredible transitions over the years. Some people continue to come to their church even though they've moved out to the suburbs. The churches have a strong interest in being good for the community and being a part of the community, which fits in exactly with what organizing is all about.

AO'D: When an organization like SESCO tries to align itself with neighbors, it finds success when it deals with small issues. According to Jim Diers, SESCO's earliest victory came about this way: A neighborhood school was located on a busy street. When a serious accident injured two children, the residents joined together to request streetlights and stop signs from the city. But this particular intersection was not a high priority for the engineering department.

Diers: Finally, we just decided we'd exercise our pedestrian rights. There was a group of 75 people that got organized. They just used the crosswalk, back and

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forth, back and forth, stopping all traffic on Empire Way. It wasn't long after that that they got their signal light.

AO'D: Neighborhoods are likely to organize in opposition to something – a high-rise apartment, a school closure, a freeway. Activists are quick to point out that such threats transcend the differences among neighbors.

Boyle: It doesn't matter what kind of education you have or who you are, whenever there's a crisis in Wallingford, all kinds of people come pouring out to help. When there's no crisis going on, it seems that the people are complacent. But that isn't true. Just threaten to put in a high rise or take out a school or what have you, and the people are there, all kinds of people.

AO'D: But threats are not the only organizing tool. Often, Seattle residents have found their neighborhood identity by working together for positive ends. Terry Pettus, the retired president of the Floating Home Owners Association, recalls how a park clean-up project brought people in his neighborhood together.

Pettus: When we were working down there, an old man, a retired senior, was living up there in a little apartment. He saw all this activity and he came down and wanted to know what he could do. And lo and behold he fixed up this sign – “Welcome to Lynn Street Park.” Well, he's long dead but his sign is still there. And it seems to me that it's a symbolism of how communities are built. They're built with people and relationships between people.

In the City of Neighborhoods, I'm Arthur O'Donnell.