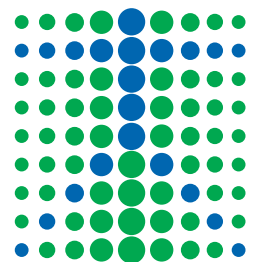




ACCOMPLISHING A PLACE-BASED PEOPLE STRATEGY FOR COMMUNITY REVITALIZATION

# Community Empowerment Manual

2ND EDITION



Partners for Livable  
Communities



## **Partners for Livable Communities (Partners)**

is a non-profit leadership organization working to improve the livability of communities by promoting quality of life, economic development, and social equity. Since its founding in 1977, Partners has helped communities set a common vision for the future, discover and use new resources for community and economic development, and build public/private coalitions to further their goals.

Partners promotes livable communities through technical assistance, leadership training, workshops, charrettes, research and publications. More than 1,200 individuals and groups from local, state, national, international, public and private and media organizations make up Partners' resource network and share innovative ideas on livability and community improvement.

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# Acknowledgements

I would like to thank **Carly Grimm**, a staff member of Partners for Livable Communities (Partners) for several years who has now moved on to the University of Florida Law School, for updating and repositioning our Community Empowerment Manual.

The first edition of this manual, published in 1999 and sponsored by Bank of America and The Healy Foundation, had its genesis in 1995. As the project developed, Partners received support from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development—under the leadership of Secretary Henry Cisneros—to begin a two-year collaborative research effort analyzing comprehensive community strategies for change. The project involved eight U.S. and European communities and was featured in *Governing Magazine*.

Grimm, working with Susan Robinson, was able to take our decade-old work, reorganize it, and update it with new case studies. She has allowed us to bring out a second edition as a resource on how to truly mobilize a community that we can distribute in this country and abroad. We hope this manual will empower citizens to seek equitable and fair visions of the future and to think cooperatively and regionally on how to aggregate the resources, the talent, the wealth and the opportunities needed to compete in a new global world.

Partners, through its community assistance program, is ready to assist and serve communities as they hopefully gain wisdom through this publication and enjoy the common sense that this documents portrays.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Robert McNulty". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right from the end of the name.

Robert McNulty  
President  
Partners for Livable Communities

# Introduction

This community empowerment manual provides key strategies to make communities stronger, safer and better places to live and work. It is not a static document. Rather, the manual is a tool that can be used in a variety of ways as a guide to create and maintain strong, sustainable and livable communities.

A sense of place and a pride of ownership—symbolic or actual—are powerful motivations for community action. People’s love of place makes them willing to act to preserve it or improve it. Parents work to improve the schools their children attend. Neighborhood groups form to keep crime off their streets. Block residents come together to transform vacant lots for such place-enhancing uses as playgrounds or community gardens. Merchants coordinate to remake their hodge-podge retail neighborhoods into destination shopping districts.

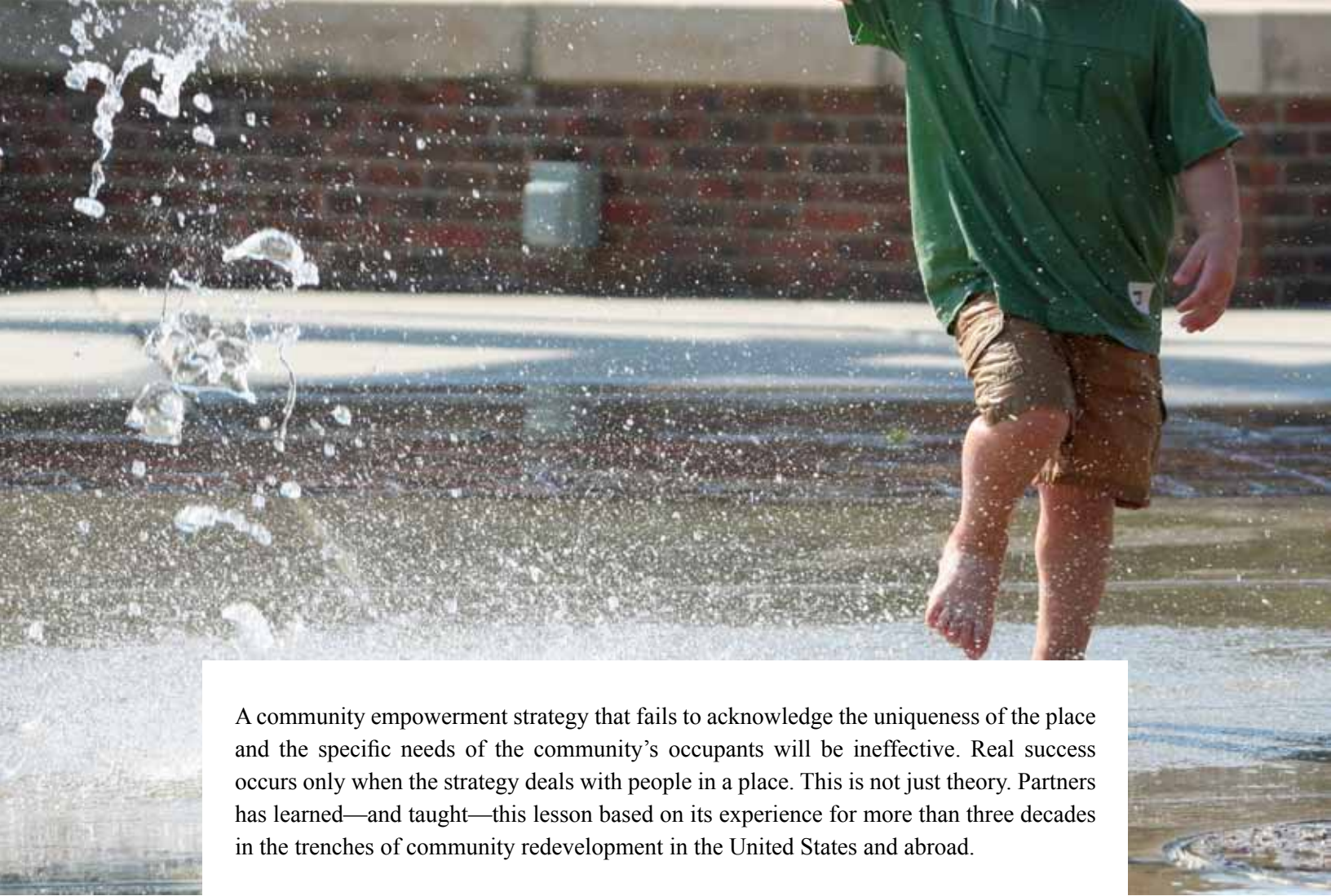
As Partners for Livable Communities (Partners) has learned from working across America, the most important element of a livable place is its people. People make communities by how they live, how they work, and how they relate to one another. Individuals should have the chance to maximize their potential, contribute to their communities, earn a living, and aspire toward a better life.

Involvement of individuals is essential. Citizens must be proactive in solving problems rather than acting only in opposition to leadership and/or institutions. This requires self-sustaining, bottom-up participation.

Partners has come to see that livable communities offer an environment that supports people. Specifically, livable communities are economically viable and environmentally sustainable; they assure social equity and provide educational opportunities for all. These people-oriented elements are implemented in a variety of ways that are unique to each locale.

## A Focus on People in a Place

By bringing together strategies that deal specifically with its people and strategies that deal specifically with its place, a community can forge new approaches that are rooted in the particular needs and desires of its residents and in the individual characteristics of its setting and physical attributes.



A community empowerment strategy that fails to acknowledge the uniqueness of the place and the specific needs of the community’s occupants will be ineffective. Real success occurs only when the strategy deals with people in a place. This is not just theory. Partners has learned—and taught—this lesson based on its experience for more than three decades in the trenches of community redevelopment in the United States and abroad.

We have put together this primer on the elements of community empowerment to help a wide audience solve problems, overcome challenges and create the communities they envision.

**This manual can empower:**

- Citizens—both those currently engaged and those frustrated by lack of action
- Local government officials
- Community organizers
- Civic leaders
- Non-profits and NGOs
- Business organizations
- Social agencies
- Educational and cultural institutions

This manual offers evidence from places that have accomplished community empowerment through a variety of strategies. We distill many of the lessons common to these success stories to provide guidelines for other communities just starting on the path to livability. Community planning focused on people in place is an empowerment process that can benefit communities of any scale, from neighborhoods to districts to towns/cities to regions. ■

**“A sustainable society** is one that can persist over generations, one that is far-seeing enough, flexible enough, and wise enough not to undermine either its physical or its social systems of support.”

# Chapter 1:

## DEFINING AND

## ACHIEVING LIVABILITY

### What is a community?

Defining the boundaries of a community can be challenging. Because this manual is designed to serve communities of many sizes, it will not strictly define these borders, but describe certain elements that are present in all communities. It is up to you to decide whether your empowerment campaign encompasses a small borough, a neighborhood, an entire city, or extends across the region.

A community consists of two major components: physical and social infrastructure.

- **Physical infrastructure:**

streets, parks, buildings, and other elements that connect people to place

- **Social infrastructure:**

organizations, institutions, community services, friends, family, and other elements that connect people to one another

### What makes a community livable?

The notion of “livable communities” gained currency in the 1970s when Partners for Livable Communities began to work with communities determined to sharpen their economic edge, meet the needs of current residents, and attract new people and businesses. Since then, the call to make communities more livable has become a mantra among political and business leaders, smart growth advocates, and many other community stakeholders.

Although the particular livability issues that community leaders choose to focus on may vary, these interests are generally interconnected and benefit all community members. For example, efforts that enable residents to remain independent as they age—such as increased housing options and more accessible and walkable environments—are beneficial to a broad cross-section of a community’s population.

Through decades of hands-on experience, research, and consultation with experts in the field, Partners has come to identify key elements that make a community livable: equity and sustainability.

## EQUITY

A truly livable community is livable for all residents. Livable communities have a culture that values diversity, fairness, dignity, and equal opportunity. The components of livability must be equally available and accessible to all residents.

In a people-based place strategy, access to economic and cultural opportunities are important considerations. Equity in a community context means jobs, substantial income, decent housing, a good education, and adequate healthcare are within reach for all residents.

## SUSTAINABILITY

Although sustainability has been defined in many ways, Donella Meadows (co-author of *Beyond the Limits*) sums it up well:

“A sustainable society is one that can persist over generations, one that is far-seeing enough, flexible enough, and wise enough not to undermine either its physical or its social systems of support.”<sup>1</sup>

It is clear then, that the components of livability must be sustainable and include long-term, integrated systems that address the interdependent economic, environmental, and social concerns of a community. To help preserve and enhance livability, many communities have adopted the goal of “sustainable development” to guide their community empowerment strategies.

Sustainable communities go beyond environmental measures, addressing the full range of a community’s needs such as housing, health care, education and public safety. In the context of livable communities, the term “sustainability” includes physical and social environments as well as the natural environment. ■