

Identifying Assets and Facilitating Social Networks in the Diverse Communities of Albany Park

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"Accessibility...is not always realized; it depends not least on forms of social organization."

Hannerz (1980 p.116)

Introduction

This paper is based on research done for the North River Commission as part of The Field Museum's Urban Research Initiative. Research was conducted during the summer of 1999 in the parks, businesses, churches and community centers of Albany Park, a vibrant neighborhood on Chicago's Northwest Side. Bounded by Foster Street to the north, Montrose Avenue to the south, Pulaski Road to the west, and the Chicago River to the east, Albany Park's physical geography is diverse. Quiet residential streets, city parks and schools, the Chicago River, and a vibrant commercial corridor along Lawrence Avenue provide a backdrop for the dynamic social and cultural life of this urban neighborhood.

The North River Commission was interested in gaining useful information about the assets possessed by Albany Park's changing ethnic communities, and learning about the challenges facing these groups. In its 40-year history, the North River Commission has built strong relationships with many businesses and institutions in the neighborhood. However the Commission's ties to smaller community organizations—particularly organizations serving the neighborhood's many ethnic communities—are not as well-developed.

Project interns, along with Joel Bookman, the Commission's then Executive Director, decided that the research should focus on discovering the social assets possessed by Albany Park's ethnic communities, and devising ways for these assets to be integrated into a vibrant social

network connecting Albany Park community groups, institutions, businesses and individuals. Such a social network could work collectively to help people and groups access resources necessary to address neighborhood challenges, thus making Albany Park a more vibrant, safer place to live and work.

The following four open-ended research questions were designed to elicit information from diverse sources about the assets and resources present in the neighborhood, the concerns of people living and working there, people's overall perceptions of the neighborhood, and their suggestions for improving the quality of life and work in Albany Park:

- What are the social assets available for public use in Albany Park?
- What are the concerns or "hot issues" facing people who live and work in the neighborhood?
- What are the community needs that are not being met by organizations, institutions, and businesses?
- What should be done to improve Albany Park for residents? For community organizations? For businesses?

Methodology

A variety of social science research techniques, such as participant observation, open-ended interviews, focus groups, and asset mapping were employed to gather rich, meaningful data that addressed the established research questions. This data could then be used by the North River Commission to build strong relationships with and among Albany Park community organizations, business, and local institutions.

History of the Neighborhood

Albany Park is an historic port-of-entry neighborhood for new immigrants and refugees. The polyethnic character of the neighborhood has endured for decades, even as its residents' countries of origin have changed. Albany Park experienced its first significant growth as an urban neighborhood in the 1930s and '40s when European-Jewish immigrants moved to the area, constructing houses and apartments, and building successful businesses. As this upwardly-mobile ethnic population began to move to the northern suburbs in the 1960s, Korean immigrant groups began to move into the neighborhood. Although many from Albany Park's Korean community have also moved to the northern and western suburbs, the influence of this population is still significant, as many Korean-owned businesses still line Lawrence Avenue. In fact, Lawrence Avenue is known as "Little Korea," and Korean-Americans living outside the neighborhood often return to shop at Korean markets on Lawrence Avenue.

Albany Park Today

Today, Albany Park is home to large Latino and Southeast Asian populations, as well as growing Bosnian and Middle-Eastern populations. According to residents and local community organizations, Albany Park is the city's most ethnically diverse neighborhood. A Mexican bakery, an Arabic video store, and a Korean dentist office occupy storefronts along a short stretch of Lawrence Avenue. The diversity of Albany Park's community organizations is, itself, indicative of the neighborhood's ethnic and cultural composition. The Bosnian Refugee Association, the Cambodian Association of Illinois, and the Latino Pentecostal Church were the newest members of the North River Commission in the summer of 1999.

In addition to being highly culturally diverse, Albany Park is also a young neighborhood. Many young families have made Albany Park their home. The age of the neighborhood, as well as its diversity, is reflected in Albany Park's crowded public schools. At the time of this study, over 60 languages and dialects were spoken at one local high school, and a local elementary school enrolled 100 kindergarten

students who spoke no English at the beginning of the school year.

Another significant dimension of Albany Park's diversity is the economic diversity of its residents. One of the reasons Albany Park is the first stop for many of Chicago's new immigrant populations is the affordability of housing and services in the area. Recent housing trends are especially illustrative of the persistent economic disparity in Albany Park. Housing in the heart of the neighborhood—along tree-lined streets off of Lawrence and Kedzie Avenues—is predominantly tenement-style rental housing. Much of this housing is in substandard condition, with faulty plumbing and wiring. Meanwhile, most houses on the outskirts of the neighborhood are modest, well-kept single family homes. These owner-occupied houses belong to Albany Park's small, but stable, middle-class residents, many of whom moved to the neighborhood as immigrants decades ago. At the time of this study, Albany Park's rental housing market was beginning to face pressure from developers interested



in converting rental properties into high-end condominiums well out of the financial reach of their current occupants. Paradoxically, these condominiums would be sold to higher income people drawn to the neighborhood by its cultural diversity and affordability.

Relevance of a Heterogeneous Neighborhood

Albany Park is a fluid place. People and groups move in and out of the area, changing the social, cultural, and economic fabric of the neighborhood as they go. It follows that the social and cultural assets possessed by neighborhood people are as dynamic as the neighborhood itself. Challenges faced by Albany Park residents are somewhat less fluid than are neighborhood assets—many challenges faced by Albany Park are typical of urban neighborhoods. However, people's responses to neighborhood challenges reflect the diverse neighborhood they live in, and demonstrate their desire to draw on their assets to improve the quality of life in Albany Park.

Findings

As the research proceeded throughout the summer of 1999, five distinct themes emerged: *Youth, Safety, Services, Affordability and Diversity*. Each was consistently cited by informants as the sites of strong neighborhood assets. Interestingly, these five themes also emerged in discussions about the challenges facing Albany Park. This correlation between assets and challenges suggests that people recognize and are willing to use their social assets to address neighborhood challenges. In fact, when informants were asked what should be done to improve the quality of life in Albany Park, they suggested creative ways in which existing neighborhood assets could be used to address challenges.

Research findings are presented below, arranged according to the five research themes that emerged during the course of fieldwork. It is important to look broadly at both the assets and the challenges present in Albany Park, because different people have different assets to offer the community, face different challenges, and have different ideas about how assets should be used to ameliorate neighborhood conditions. Further, although findings are arranged according to distinct themes, none of those themes is exclusive of the others. All five themes run, inextricably, through life in Albany Park. By looking broadly at Albany Park's social and business fabric, potential linkages can be identified. This process of mapping of Albany Park's many assets is an effective way to promote and facilitate resource-sharing and collaboration so that diverse groups can work together to create solutions to common challenges.

Findings: Youth

During the research period, youth were a strong presence on the streets, in the parks, at community organizations, and in neighborhood shops. They were described as "the pulse" of Albany Park by a woman who facilitates a youth group at a local church. The talent of youth and their capacity to contribute to the betterment of neighborhoods is immense, but they are often overlooked because of their perceived immaturity and lack of life experience (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993). Albany Park youth have strong cultural identities and many ideas for improving the neighborhood.

Recognizing that youth are a powerful force in the neighborhood—in both positive and sometimes negative ways—many community organizations and churches have formed youth groups and youth programming to capitalize on youth talent and provide a "positive" growth atmosphere. These youth programs were regarded as strong assets as well and provide youth with resources to help address the challenges they face.

Assets

Strong youth programs were the most commonly mentioned neighborhood assets by informants from many different sectors of the neighborhood. Youth programs are available at a number of area religious institutions, schools, and neighborhood organizations, and researchers were able to spend considerable time meeting with—and participating in—youth groups. Youth programs throughout Albany Park have worked to establish strong social networks. For example, the youth groups at the Cambodian Association of Illinois and at Korean American Community Services have ties with a number of youth groups at other Southeast Asian community organizations on Chicago's North Side. Social networks have also been established between youth organizations and neighborhood service providers. Both Youth Net 17 and the Albany Park Theater Project collaborate with Youth Outreach Services, an organization that provides various counseling services.

Researchers spoke with the organizers of youth programs and with youth themselves about the programs' purposes and goals, and about why they were considered neighborhood assets. Albany Park youth programs fall into two categories: those designed *for* youth, and those that were more youth-driven. The programs facilitated by adults

tended to focus on keeping youth out of trouble with the police, and building their self-confidence and sense of responsibility. Youth-driven programs, most notably Albany Park Theater Project, provided youth with creative outlets to express themselves. Both types of youth programs enjoyed success and were considered assets by adults and youth.

The reasons that these two different types of youth programs were considered neighborhood assets differed. Adult-facilitated programs designed to keep youth “out of trouble” were considered assets because they provided youth with structured places to go and structured activities in which to participate. Keeping youth away from gangs was a major priority of many Albany Park organizations. To this end, these organizations provide structured, “positive” activities for youth, meanwhile reinforcing the message that gang membership is a “negative” activity.

Examples of successful adult-facilitated youth programs are Chicago Park District Summer Camps and Church Youth Groups. The Park District’s summer camps, designed for younger children, mainly consisted of organized sports and art programs. Parents complimented the camps on their quality, but complained that the Park District should expand the programs because they fill up too quickly. Church youth groups provide a structured place for older youth to meet with adult facilitators to discuss religious topics, and also to discuss issues they face at school and at home. At one youth group meeting at this church, the group’s advisor talked with the youth about strategies for staying out of gangs.

Youth-driven programs, on the other hand, were considered assets because youth were encouraged to find creative, proactive ways to use their own assets. Youth-driven programs in Albany Park focused on celebrating diversity, helping youth develop strong cultural identities, and encouraged youth to make choices and deal with challenges themselves. Youth-driven groups rated higher among youth than did adult-driven youth groups.

Examples of successful youth-driven groups in Albany Park are Albany Park Theater Project and Youth Net 17. Albany Park Theater Project is a grassroots community theater group founded in 1996, by two young adults with the goal of teaching theater techniques to 13-21 year-old youth, and building community in the process. Youth involved in Albany Park Theater Project developed their performances during “storytelling sessions,” where members shared personal, defining experiences with the group,

and then the group decided which of these stories to adapt into stage productions. The goal of Albany Park Theater Project was to help youth define culture and community through their own words and their families’ experiences. The group is open to any young person who wants to be involved, and has developed a strong support network in the neighborhood.

Despite the fact that it is run by the Chicago Police Department, Youth Net 17 was cited as one of the most popular youth-driven organizations by Albany Park Youth. Youth Net 17 is a citywide drop-in program for youth ages 8-18. Youth Net 17 is operated out of Roosevelt High School, where youth may participate in free programs and classes, such as writing, sports, and art. Despite the structured space and activities of Youth Net 17, it was most highly valued by youth because participation in structured activities was not mandatory; many youth view Youth Net 17 as a place where they can spend time with their friends doing art projects and listening to music without being harassed for loitering.

Challenges

Gangs

Adults and youth alike view gang activity in Albany Park as one of the most serious challenges to neighborhood quality of life. As Albany Park is a young neighborhood, many parents, teachers, and community organizations worry about the proliferation of gang culture in the neighborhood.

Albany Park is an area with a long history of gang activity. In his study of Albany Park gangs, Conquergood (1994) found that the most important function of the gang is to create a “cultural space” for young people who have been marginalized by mainstream society. The cultural space is organized and ruled by gangs and provides “support, attachment, and solidarity against a hostile world (Conquergood 1994).

Youth interviewed for this study seem to understand gang culture better than adults, who only associated gangs with violence. Youth attending a summer art camp at a local park explained that gangs offer young people protection and respect that they cannot get elsewhere. However, even though they have an understanding of gang culture and are able to negotiate gang territories, youth interviewed said that gang violence has escalated in Albany Park and they are

afraid of being caught in the middle of a violent gang confrontation.

Whereas youth saw gangs as a response to the constraints of “adult culture,” adults saw gang membership as the result of a lack of structure and “positive” role models. Nearly every community organization contacted during this study had programs in place to promote “positive youth interaction” and to provide youth with alternative activities and role models.

Criminalization of Youth

In 1998, Roosevelt High School posted “Most Wanted” posters in school hallways. These posters showed pictures of students with unexcused absences or tardies and offered rewards for students who turned in these “Most Wanted” students to school officials. Youth were offended by this campaign’s blatant portrayal of teens as criminals—an attitude, youth say, which is pervasive throughout the neighborhood. In response to this “Most Wanted” campaign, youth shown on the posters began presenting themselves to school officials and demanding the promised reward.

Youth also feel criminalized by the institution charged with protecting the neighborhood: police. In fact, youth interviewed for this study feared police violence more than they feared gang violence. Youth complained that police harass them and search them unnecessarily if they are suspected of being in a gang. One teen showed researchers a bruise on his forehead where a police officer supposedly threw him against a brick wall to search him. The youth said that non-white teens—especially Latino teens—are harassed by police more often than white teens are. Conquergood (1994) found that one police and media strategy for generating community support for the eradication of gangs is to portray gangs as diseases infecting neighborhood. Gang members are also portrayed as animals preying on innocent neighborhood people. Ultimately, reducing the complexity of gang affiliation and emphasizing its negative aspects may not be the most effective way to protect youth from violent forces.

Education

The overcrowding of local public schools is another effect of Albany Park’s many young residents. Parents and youth group advisors complained that youth were not receiving a quality education in the overcrowded environment, and would not be prepared for college, or to enter the job market after graduation. Roosevelt High School and

Hibbard and Haugan Elementary Schools were most often criticized for overcrowding and inadequate education.

Response

Responding to the challenges facing youth in Albany Park is a formidable one. Youth, as a whole, have no political clout, little money, and they often receive little respect. However, when asked what should be done to improve the situation for neighborhood youth, the suggestions given reflected the assets already possessed by youth and youth organizations in the neighborhood. This demonstrates neighborhood youth’s recognition of the strength of their own assets and the assets of others in addressing challenges. Some suggestions for ways to address challenges confronting youth were:

- A neighborhood establishment—a 24-hour restaurant or a bowling alley—where youth could socialize in the evenings without being harassed by gangs, or hassled by police for loitering.
- Organize mentoring programs where younger children are paired with high school students for tutoring and “gang-alternative” activities. This should be coordinated between local schools.
- Start a neighborhood soccer club for children. Several people said that this would be a good way to facilitate interactions between parents and children from different ethnic groups, because soccer is a popular sport in many cultures.
- Youth should have better access to the Internet and other computer learning tools in public places like such as libraries, community centers, and schools.

Findings: Safety

Safety is a pervasive concern for many people living and working in Albany Park. However, Albany Park residents said that they recognize that safety is an issue facing every urban community, and they believe that Albany Park is safer than many of Chicago’s other neighborhoods. Still, residents worry about drug dealing and prostitution taking place on dark streets and sidewalks at night. Most adult informants said that they feel that their homes and streets are safe. Most youth informants also said that they feel safe in the neighborhood, though they worry about gang violence.

Assets

Although safety on neighborhood streets is a major concern of Albany Park residents, most said that they feel safe in their homes. It is important to note that this feeling of security at home was due, in large part, to the strong social networks established in apartment buildings and along owner-occupied blocks of the neighborhood. These networks were typically based on shared cultural backgrounds in the case of apartment buildings and, in the case of homeowners, on personal investment in the safety of neighborhood homes and streets.

Many apartment buildings in Albany Park are occupied solely by tenants from a single ethnic group. These apartment enclaves often provide new immigrants with a sense of comfort and security. Tenants in one Cambodian-occupied building said that they like having friends nearby and felt comfortable allowing their children to visit children in other apartments in the building.

Homeowners on one neighborhood block started a neighborhood “block watch” after a series of car break-ins on their street. This watch is small, but effective, with neighbors trusting each other to call the police if they witness illegal or suspicious activity on the street. Strong leadership makes this “block watch” effective, residents said.

Challenges

While residents generally feel safe in their homes, they have concerns about the safety of other parts of the neighborhood, and much of this concern is related to gang presence in the neighborhood. The presence of gangs in the neighborhood makes people reluctant to visit some area parks, and even makes parents reluctant to send their children to some neighborhood schools. Additionally, many residents have serious doubts about the effectiveness of police in improving neighborhood safety.

Gangs

Fear of being caught in the middle of gang violence prevented many residents from using neighborhood parks and leaving their houses after dark. Albany Park residents said the quality of life in their neighborhood is severely impacted by gang activity, as described previously.

Police

Albany Park residents have serious doubts about the effectiveness of police programs to address neighborhood safety concerns. The Chicago Police Department’s CAPS (Chicago’s Alternative Policing Strategy) Program is designed to facilitate partnerships between police and the community. Regular “beat meetings” are held in the neighborhood, and residents and business owners are encouraged to meet with police to discuss issues affecting the safety of Albany Park. The CAPS Program is a success, according to police. However, neighborhood people were skeptical about the policing program. Non-white residents, in particular, said that the CAPS Program has its own agenda, and does not address the most salient issues facing the neighborhood. It was clear after several conversations with residents about neighborhood policing that distrust is perhaps the greatest barrier to successful linkages between police and residents.

Response

Improving safety in Albany Park is a top priority of residents, businesses, community organizations and the police. Suggestions made about how to go about making Albany Park a safer neighborhood were similar across the different segments of the neighborhood. Suggested steps to be taken to improve neighborhood safety included:

- Organize more neighborhood “block watches.” They are often very effective, but require people to take leadership roles.
- Beat cops who patrol the neighborhood on foot should stop into businesses along their beats and get to know storeowners.

Although people agreed on steps to improve neighborhood safety by addressing identified safety challenges, however, they also agreed that language and cultural barriers were preventing Albany Park from organizing to address shared safety challenges. Organizing people who speak many different languages and have different cultural ideas about crime, the police, and safety is the biggest challenge to improving safety in Albany Park.

Findings: *Services*

The services available to Albany Park residents and businesspeople are varied, and include social services, business services, transportation, and healthcare. Of these services, social services provided by community based organizations were often cited by people as one of the most important assets present in Albany Park. Hannerz (1980) emphasizes the importance of *access* to resources in urban environments, and ethnic-based community organizations are especially important in this neighborhood where many people are new Americans who do not speak English and do not know where or how to access important neighborhood resources and services like markets, schools, health care, and transportation.

Assets

Community Organizations

Albany Park is fortunate to have many active community-based organizations with strong programs and services. The great majority of these organizations are ethnic organizations serving a particular segment of Albany Park's multiethnic population. Groups such as Korean American Community Services and the Cambodian Association of Illinois have been operating in the neighborhood for over 20 years. Other groups, like the Bosnian Refugee Association, are relative newcomers.

It was clear that the people of Albany Park regarded these community based organizations as strong neighborhood assets. The organizations are tuned in to the specific needs of their specific constituencies, and they have evolved programs and services to meet these needs. These organizations are well known within the neighborhood's tightly knit ethnic communities, and are important assets, especially for new immigrants.

Non-ethnic community organizations and centers also exist in the neighborhood, though they are less well known to residents. The Albany Park Community Center provides childcare services and English as a Second Language (ESL) classes for adults, as well as opening a food pantry several days a week.



Two of the strongest community organizations cited by residents and the services they provide are:

The Cambodian Association of Illinois

- ESL classes
- Citizenship classes
- Youth programs
- Employment programs
- Tenant Rights workshops
- Health workshops
- Parenting classes
- Cultural/dance programs
- Women's outreach program

Korean American Community Services

- ESL classes
- Employment assistance
- Daycare services
- Senior housing
- Healthcare and healthcare referrals

Businesses

The Albany Park business community is another strong neighborhood asset. Most businesses along Lawrence Avenue are small independent businesses owned by people who live in or around the neighborhood. People living in the neighborhood are able to shop for goods from their native countries without travelling outside the neighborhood, and people from outside the neighborhood often come to Lawrence Avenue to shop. One Korean-American man said that his family used to live in the neighborhood, and they still drive in from the northern suburbs to go to Korean markets on Lawrence Avenue.

Transportation

The presence of the Chicago Transit Authority Brown Line train in Albany Park—especially at Kimball Station—was described as an asset for the neighborhood, and also for the entire city. The trains make it possible for people to come to work and shop in Albany Park and also make the Loop and other areas of the City accessible for Albany Park residents.

Healthcare

Nearly every community and religious organization interviewed during this study mentioned the availability of healthcare at nearby Swedish Covenant Hospital as an asset to the area. Many ethnic-based community groups and religious organizations are working to educate their clients and congregations about the importance of preventative care. Health fairs are held throughout the year at the hospital, local churches, and at some community organizations. Sometimes, these health fairs target certain ethnic groups, because different groups have different ideas about when healthcare is required and who should administer it.

Residents were also excited about the new Wellness Center in Roosevelt High School, which was slated to open in the fall of 1999. The Wellness Center is a place where students and other people from the community can receive healthcare and health education. This was mentioned as a neighborhood asset because of its focus on preventative care, and also because it is an accessible link between the school, the community, and the hospital.

Religious Institutions

Area religious institutions were cited by many as neighborhood assets, not only for the religious guidance they provided, but also for their community outreach and community building activities. For example, several churches operate a food pantry that is open seven days a week. One Catholic Church runs a youth Confirmation class where young people gathered to talk about the life issues they face. Furthermore, a neighborhood healthcare advocate said that religious institutions are some of the best places to distribute information about classes, workshops, meetings, and health fairs. Over 60 percent of the people in Albany Park attend weekly religious services, and they place a lot of stock in the information and advice given to them by religious leaders.

Challenges

Repetition of services among community organizations is one of the biggest challenges facing Albany Park service providers. Looking at the list of services provided by the Cambodian Association of Illinois and Korean American Community Services, it is apparent that both organizations offer ESL classes, employment services and healthcare services. These two organizations are located within five blocks of each other in Albany Park, however interactions between the two groups are nearly non-existent.

The situation described above is not unique to those two organizations. Language and cultural barriers prevent many community organizations from forming social service networks within the neighborhood. Limited methods of disseminating information about available services are also a challenge faced by neighborhood service providers. Clearly, people cannot access services if they are not aware of their availability.

Response

Lack of social services was not an issue in Albany Park. In fact, many organizations duplicate services. In order to make more people aware of available services, and to facilitate linkages between service providers, several community organizations suggested that a comprehensive directory of all services and programs offered by neighborhood organizations should be compiled and distributed at various neighborhood community organizations, schools and religious institutions.

The researchers' major recommendation to the North River Commission at the end of the research period was based on this need for dissemination of information about neighborhood services and resources in different languages. The suggested way to achieve such a database was through an Internet-based "Virtual Community Center," which would be available to the public in the form of computer terminals featuring information about businesses, people, organizations, events, and health in Albany Park (see Bookman article in this issue). These computer terminals would be placed in train stations, libraries, park field houses, and some local community centers and businesses. An easy-to-use console would allow the user to select the language the information is presented in and would guide the user to

links about Albany Park happenings, job listings, and upcoming health fairs.

As a “Virtual Community Center,” the public would be able to submit information to be posted. Information could be spread more easily this way. For example, a flier about the tenant rights workshop submitted at one terminal would be posted to all the terminals in the neighborhood. This site would be maintained by the North River Commission—perhaps in cooperation with another organization—and funding would come from grants. The North River Commission has taken initial steps to examine the feasibility of this “Virtual Community Center.”

Findings: *Affordability*

Research for this study was conducted during a time when many Chicago neighborhoods were feeling the effects of gentrification. In the summer of 1999, Albany Park was still a relatively affordable neighborhood, though gentrification pressures were beginning to be felt. The affordability of Albany Park made it a place where recent immigrants with little money could afford to rent an apartment, secure a job, and earn enough money to sustain their families. One reason why Albany Park’s housing stock remains affordable is its continued deterioration. Landlords are unable to attract higher-income tenants and charge higher rents because the many of the units are substandard. This affordable housing is the only option for many low-income immigrant families (Conquergood 1992).

In a sense, Albany Park’s affordability allows for its cultural diversity. Affordable rental units allow recent immigrants from many different countries to settle in the neighborhood. Commercial rental space is also affordable, and some of these immigrants have opened businesses, contributing to Lawrence Avenue’s multicultural commercial corridor. In short, affordability was a major vehicle for promoting cultural diversity in Albany Park.

Assets

The affordability of housing stock in Albany Park is a major asset—and a necessity—for many residents who cannot afford to pay high rents. Likewise, lower commercial property values mean that rental rates for commercial space are affordable, and small businesses thrive along Lawrence Avenue. In general, people said that goods and services along Lawrence Avenue were affordably priced. Discount

clothing and sundry shops, and ethnic markets comprised much of the streets commercial offerings. The affordable nature of Albany Park has allowed many immigrant groups to settle in the neighborhood, start businesses, and raise families on modest wages.

Challenges

Gentrification

Residents, community organizations, and businesses all worry about the future of affordability in Albany Park. If gentrification becomes a major trend in Albany Park, residents will be displaced from their apartments, property taxes will rise, and small, independent businesses will not be able to afford commercial rents. One youth group director said that three of the teenagers in the group had recently been displaced from their homes by high-end, private developer buy-outs.

Deteriorating Housing Stock

Gentrification is one factor affecting affordable housing in Albany Park. Another factor is the deteriorating condition of some neighborhood apartment buildings due to age and landlord neglect. Residents of a single-room occupancy (SRO) building off Kedzie Street were fearful of being displaced by the demolition of their building by the city. Residents of this building said that they will “not go down without a fight,” emphasizing the importance of affordable housing to Albany Park residents.

Many Albany Park residents are reluctant to complain about substandard apartment conditions for fear of being evicted. At a tenants’ meeting in a building occupied exclusively by Cambodian families, women described leaking pipes, cracked toilets, broken windows, and rotting stairs in their apartments. They were reluctant to report the landlord to the City Building Inspector because they did not know they were entitled to safe, clean, dwellings, and most spoke little English and felt intimidated by the landlord. Landlords, on the other hand, also said that they would like to be able to communicate with their non-English-speaking tenants better so that the tenants’ needs could be better met.

Concerns about losing affordable housing extend across ethnic and cultural lines. Informants who expressed concerns about affordable housing were Latino, White, and Cambodian, and it can be assumed that loss of affordable housing is also a concern to Albany Park’s many other eth-

nic and cultural communities. Albany Park's economic diversity, which is discussed in greater detail further on, makes the preservation of affordable housing options integral to maintaining diversity throughout the neighborhood.

Response

At the time of this study, gentrification in Albany Park had not progressed to a stage where many residents felt threatened. Property values had not risen substantially, and business owners were not worried about the immediate stability of their businesses. Residents did remark that, when gentrification begins to expand more rapidly, they do not know how they will fight this powerful force. They cited surrounding neighborhoods, like Mayfair and Ravenswood, where gentrifiers have purchased run-down apartment buildings and renovated them as luxury condominiums. Although tenants were given first option to purchase these condominiums, they could not afford to stay and had to seek affordable housing elsewhere. Neighborhood organizations should work with interested renters to connect them with programs that help first-time homebuyers.

Though gentrification was not an immediate concern of Albany Park residents, they were responding to several immediate challenges to affordable housing in the summer of 1999. For example, tenants of the SRO building that was threatened by demolition banded together and protested the demolition at community meetings and to the local alderman. In another instance, the North River Commission's on-staff community organizer arranged a meeting with Cambodian tenants of a run-down tenement building to teach them tenant's rights, and help them file complaint against their landlord. These two cases are examples of how social networks and community groups are using their assets and resources to affect change in Albany Park.

Findings: *Diversity*

Assets

The issue of diversity is a complicated one, not easily mastered during a six-week research period. Hannerz (1980) writes about *diversity* and *accessibility* as reciprocal forces shaping urban life. Diversity of people, goods and services is much greater in large urban areas than in rural ones, and likewise the accessibility of this diversity takes on

new dimensions in a dense urban neighborhood. As a large, dense, heterogeneous neighborhood, Albany Park provides urbanites with opportunities to access diverse resources and people.

Almost without exception, diversity was cited as an asset by informants from varied ethnic and economic sectors. However, the reasons people gave for *why* they consider diversity to be an asset of Albany Park varied. Some people appreciated that diversity draws people from other neighborhoods to spend money at ethnic shops and restaurants along Lawrence Avenue. For others, diversity in Albany Park was valued because people from different cultures live together and treat each other with respect.

Business owners enjoyed the accessibility of many good restaurants and small ethnic markets in the neighborhood. Likewise, the Albany Park Chamber of Commerce is interested in marketing neighborhood restaurants and other businesses to people in other parts of the city. From this viewpoint, diversity is valued because it makes Albany Park an exciting destination for people looking to sample ethnic cuisine and browse local shops and markets.

People from the neighborhood's many ethnic groups spoke about the value of diversity from a different perspective. They valued diversity as an asset in Albany Park because people from many different backgrounds live together in the neighborhood in relative peace. Unlike business owners who value the cross-cultural interactions that take place in restaurants and shops, residents place more value on the peaceful quality of interactions, rather than on the fact that interactions occur in the first place. Also unlike business owners and the Chamber of Commerce, who seek out diversity, residents said that they do not go out of their way to meet and socialize with people from other ethnic groups. Above all, they appreciate that the diversity in Albany Park is a safe, respectful diversity.

These disparate attitudes about the value of diversity illustrate these two groups' different ideas about what makes Albany Park a good place to live and work. To business owners, Albany Park's diversity is the key to making the neighborhood a successful commercial destination. For many of Albany Park's immigrant and refugee residents, the diversity of Albany Park is startling compared to many of their home countries, where brutal ethnic and cultural wars raged. The cultural backgrounds of these residents give them a unique perspective for understanding diversity in Albany Park. They do not value the *fact* of diversity, but rather appreciate *how it is enacted*.

Challenges

Informants cited a number of diversity-related challenges facing Albany Park's multiethnic population. Almost without exception, these challenges stem from language and cultural barriers. Many people in Albany Park face communication challenges on a daily basis. Non-English speakers often have difficulties getting information about healthcare, childcare, employment, educational opportunities, and some have trouble talking with police and landlords. Likewise, English-only speaking service providers, employers, police, and landlords all said that they wish they could communicate with new immigrants more effectively. Language barriers prevent these new immigrants from accessing important resources, and also from sharing their assets with the larger community.

In some cases, miscommunications have caused distrust and hard feelings between some neighborhood groups. For example, owners of an ethnic business were insulted when it was suggested that the commercial signage along Lawrence Avenue should be "cleaned-up." The business owners took this to mean that non-English business signs were "dirty" and needed to be "cleaned-up." In fact, the sign clean-up project was part of a façade improvement program and applied to all business on the street. It was suggested that all signs should lay flat against the buildings rather than coming out at a 90-degree angle.

Response

People in Albany Park value diversity as a neighborhood asset, however they also recognize that language and cultural barriers can cause misunderstandings among groups. When asked what could be done to address challenges and create communication bridges between the neighborhood's ethnic and cultural groups, people's responses focused on ways to *value* and *stabilize* diversity. These suggestions included:

- A neighborhood-wide party or festival would be a way for neighbors to show that they *value diversity*. It would be a way to bring people together to celebrate the dance, food, music, art and company of different cultures. It was even suggested that Lawrence Avenue should be blocked off for an "Albany Park street party."
- Creating more "community spaces" where people could go to share their cultures and talents. An employee at the Albany Park Community Center said that many people

want to teach cooking, sewing and tae-kwon-do classes, but there that is not enough space at the Center. People's desire to share their cultural assets with others indicates the *value* they place on diversity.

- Creating a program to help local renters become homeowners in the neighborhood. This idea came from a local businessperson, and demonstrates the business community's desire to *stabilize diversity* in the area and to keep housing affordable.
- It was suggested that local banks should advertise to low-income households who are new to the area and may not know how to open bank accounts. This suggestion also reflects a desire to *stabilize diversity* in Albany Park.
- The Chamber of Commerce would like Albany Park Bank & Trust Company to support people starting new businesses in the neighborhood by providing low-interest loans. This would help people already living and working in the area, as well as drawing new businesses to the neighborhood. This suggestion demonstrates the Chamber's desire to *stabilize* the diversity of area businesses.

Conclusions

Although the research for this paper is organized and presented in five separate themes, these themes are not exclusive unto themselves, and cannot be successfully analyzed as such. The categorization of these five themes is a useful framework for identifying the unique types of assets and challenges facing Albany Park. However, it must be understood that *all* aspects of life in Albany Park are interconnected. For example, recent immigrant groups in Albany Park adds to the rich ethnic and cultural *diversity* of the neighborhood, they occupy *affordable housing* units, own and work at *businesses* along Lawrence and Kedzie Avenue, and have children who go to *local schools* and participate in *youth organizations*.

These interconnections are a considerable neighborhood asset and provide opportunities for social networks to be formed. Barriers to social network formation in Albany Park exist despite the area's many assets and strengths. Likewise, challenges faced by the people of Albany Park do not persist because the neighborhood lacks the assets to conquer them. Rather, many challenges persist because communication and cultural difficulties prevent the sharing of assets among the neighborhood's many small "communities."

The purpose of this research project was to gather information about Albany Park's assets and challenges, and to determine sites for potential social network connections between groups and individuals. The data presented in the preceding pages is information about five major neighborhood "themes" in Albany Park: Youth, Safety, Services, Affordability, and Diversity. Assets and challenges related to each of these "themes" are identified, as are people's ideas for employing existing neighborhood resources to improve neighborhood quality of life. Possible social network connections are also identified. It was suggested many times during the summer of 1999 that the people of Albany Park possess all of the assets and resources necessary to addressing neighborhood challenges, however, language and cultural barriers have prevented extensive social networking and resource-sharing to this point.

Coordination of these assets across languages and cultures will be the greatest challenge to successful neighborhoods. This type of participatory collaboration and community building has always been the North River Commission's strength. By recognizing the fluid nature of Albany Park, the Commission can effectively work with diverse segments of the neighborhood population to facilitate social networks and the sharing of information and resources. This will not be a one-time task, but rather a continuing process, responsive to the constant changes in Albany Park's dynamic communities.

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