

Blake Road Corridor Project

Hopkins, Minnesota

PROJECT SUMMARY

In the spring of 2005, Hopkins Police Chief Craig Reid monitored a radio call to his officers of a disturbance involving a “man with a gun” in a park located in a neighborhood of mostly rental properties. When Chief Reid arrived, he was struck by the unfolding scene. He saw dozens of young children appearing from between the rental houses and apartments to watch the police action. Chief Reid asked where all the kids had come from and was told they’re always around because they had nothing better to do.

What followed was a perfect example of a community coming together to turn a neighborhood around. Chief Reid turned to the community for assistance in addressing the quality of life issues in this neighborhood. Residents, landlords, business owners, the faith community, school officials, representatives from non-profit organizations, and local and county government officials came together to discuss strategies to revitalize the area and formed the “Blake Road Corridor Stakeholders Group”. They identified short and long term goals, solutions to achieve the goals and ways in which to seek community-wide support and involvement. The goals and objectives of the “Blake Road Corridor Project” were broken down into three areas: decrease crime and increase participation in neighborhood safety programs, identify and support positive choices for children with after-school and summer school activities, and improve infrastructure and provide needed services for residents in the Corridor. The members of the community partnered together to obtain the necessary funding and, through hard work, succeeded in achieving their short term goals. They continue to work together to make the Blake Road Corridor a neighborhood that is safe for those families who live there now and in the future.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Background & Need for the Project

The area known as the “Blake Road Corridor” is a highly concentrated neighborhood in Hopkins. This one mile by one-half mile area consists of over 1,400 housing units that are primarily rental property. Over the past few years, there has been a significant growth in the Somali and Latino communities resulting in the area being populated largely by people of color, many who are immigrants. There are approximately 37 dialects spoken within this confined area.

The neighborhood is bound by busy roadways and commercial property. There were few services or community facilities in the area. There was one church, no schools, few sidewalks and one small park. The physical layout of the area restricted the 600 children who live in the area from leaving to access any school, city, or private non-profit programming offered in other parts of the community. Many of them faced language barriers and financial limitations, as well as transportation issues.

In 2005, the level of crime and drug activity was on the rise in Hopkins, specifically in the Blake Road Corridor. While this area makes up less than 4% of Hopkins, it was responsible for

nearly 22% of all city police calls in 2005. Nearly 50% of all robberies and sexual assaults in Hopkins took place within the Corridor. It was not unusual for officers to be called to the area on a nightly basis for disturbances, domestic assaults, drug activity, muggings and gang-related calls. The neighborhood park was the scene of fights with teen gangs, drug dealing and other nuisance activity. Elementary school-age children observed gang activity, especially when police arrived to stop fights or arrest drug dealers and for most, this was their only summer activity.

The Corridor has several large apartment complexes represented by professional management companies, as well as a large number of duplexes owned by landlords who have little training and oversight of their properties. There are approximately forty-eight different rental property owners in the corridor, several who do not live within the state and have no local representation. When the Blake Road Corridor Project began in 2005, many rental properties in the area were in disrepair, had problem tenants resulting in repeat police calls two to three times per day, and property owners who were unresponsive to police when trying to deal with tenants or property issues. The rental turnover rate was high.

The Hopkins Police Department identified high call locations through the city's nuisance property program. Due to the high number of rentals in the city, no property inspections were taking place in duplexes unless complaints were received. Problem renters showed a pattern of being evicted from one unit only to move into another unit within the Corridor owned by a different landlord. Working with the City of Hopkins Housing Inspectors, it was discovered that these rental properties had landlords that did not conduct background checks on renters nor used the Crime-Free/Drug-Free Lease Addendum. In addition, several of the properties had housing code violations. Small units had incomplete rental agreements, if any, and eviction of problem renters typically took 3 to 6 months.

The quality of life for individuals and families living in the Blake Road Corridor became a huge concern to the Hopkins Police Department. It was out of this concern that the Blake Road Corridor Project was conceived to address the issues of increased crime, blighted properties, and lack of activities and programming for children living in the neighborhood.

Project Collaboration & Goals

The Hopkins Police Chief turned to the community for assistance in addressing these issues. He initiated discussions with the School District and other members of the community and requested immediate action be taken to organize healthy activities for the children and their families. Soon after, community members and local agencies began meeting to discuss strategies to revitalize the community and formed what is now known as the "Blake Road Corridor Stakeholders Group".

The first meeting attracted forty-five people, including residents, landlords, business owners, the faith community, school officials, representatives from non-profit organizations, and local and county government officials. The Stakeholders Group identified short and long term goals, solutions to achieve the goals, and ways in which to seek community-wide support and involvement. The goals and objectives identified by the Stakeholders were broken down into three areas:

- 1) Decrease crime & increase participation in neighborhood safety programs,

- 2) Identify and support positive choices for children with after-school and summer school activities, and
- 3) Improve infrastructure and provide needed services for residents in the Corridor.

The Stakeholders agreed there needed to be immediate short term solutions as well as long term goals put in place in order to improve the overall quality of life for the residents who live in the Corridor now as well as future residents to the area. The Group recognized the first step was the need for better communication and interaction with residents of the Blake Road Corridor in order to facilitate changes in the neighborhood and provide assistance to families while increasing their participation in their community. The Stakeholders believed a process was needed to give the residents a voice regarding their perceptions around quality of life issues.

The Group contacted the Wilder Foundation of St. Paul to conduct an extensive study of the Corridor. The Stakeholders appointed a subgroup known as the Advisory Collaborative. The Collaborative was tasked with securing the \$70,000 in funding needed for the study as well as manage the study on behalf of the Stakeholders Group. Funding support was provided by Hennepin County & their Strategic Initiative & Community Engagement Department (\$10,000), Hopkins Police Department (\$10,000), The Family Housing Fund (\$10,000), Hopkins Crime Prevention Fund (\$5,000), Local Initiatives Support Corporation (\$10,000), Community Action Partnership of Suburban Hennepin (\$7,500), The Minneapolis Foundation (\$15,000), as well as two local businesses, Target Corporation (\$1,500) and Hopkins Honda (\$1,000). The Wilder Foundation Assessment Report on the Blake Road Corridor was completed and presented to the stakeholders in March of 2008. The long term goals identified were identical to the goals the Stakeholders had previously identified. Several subgroups have been formed from the original stakeholders group to implement long term solutions recommended in this report. While the Wilder Study worked on the assessment, the Stakeholders addressed the immediate short term goals.

Goal #1 – Decrease Crime & Crime Prevention

The summer of 2005 had a dramatic increase in the level of crime in the Corridor. The Hopkins Police Department is made up of four teams. Each team takes on a yearly project such as increased police presence in a neighborhood that has seen a lot of crime or increased traffic control in an area that has safety or speed concerns. This then becomes their focus and when not handling calls, the officers patrol the specific area. In 2006, one of the teams was assigned the Blake Road Corridor as their project. They spent many hours routinely patrolling the area in their squad cars, on bike patrol, and on foot patrol. The police became highly visible in the neighborhood talking to residents on a regular basis.

This team project developed into an on-going multi-year effort. In the second year, the team focused on traffic along the Corridor, working with businesses in the area. They made 639 traffic stops during the year. The Hopkins Police detectives identified key suspects in carjacking and drug cases by reviewing the police reports. They developed central intelligence files on known offenders, gang activity and disturbance addresses in the Corridor. With this information, they coordinated information on suspects with neighboring law enforcement agencies, the Hennepin County Fugitive Task Force and the Northwest Metro Drug Task Force (Hopkins Police has a narcotics officer assigned) and formulated a plan of action.

Research into the muggings reported in the Corridor identified a pattern of attack and profile of the victims. The detectives prepared a surveillance plan and utilized undercover Reserve Police Officers. This operation became known as “Slug and Mug”. Over a period of several weeks, the undercover operation worked the Corridor area. Reserve Police Officers would mimic the behaviors of the mugging victims noted from officer reports. When the decoy was attacked, the surveillance support teams moved in quickly and apprehended the suspect. The Slug and Mug operation was successful in identifying four juvenile suspects believed to be involved in multiple offenses in 2005 and 2006. Probation restrictions on all suspects were quickly reported to County Probation resulting in the removal of two offenders from the Corridor. The two other suspects left the Corridor when other residential lease violations led to their families being evicted. The Northwest Metro Drug Task Force assisted the Hopkins Police Department with investigations into possible drug dealing in the Corridor. Surveillance details, controlled buys and trash pulls from suspected drug houses were conducted over a period of time and proved quite successful. Six arrests were made.

Close coordination with patrol along with sharing information with Housing Inspectors has helped keep drug sales down in the Corridor. Regular patrol coverage was enhanced by cooperative agreements with the neighboring City of St Louis Park Police Department and the Three Rivers Park District Police. Both agencies provided additional marked units for special patrol sweeps. Hopkins Police bicycle patrol along with bicycle patrols from the above agencies, worked the corridor as well. In 2007, the Hennepin County Sheriff’s Office provided additional marked patrol presence in the Corridor during the summer. The Hopkins Police Department was awarded a grant of \$74,712 from COPS through the MN Office of Justice Programs to provide additional police presence in the corridor for 2008 through June 2010. Joint safety and traffic projects continue to be developed in cooperation with neighborhood group input.

The Neighborhood Watch Program was organized and promoted. In May of 2006, a “Take Back the Park” picnic sponsored by the Police as a way to kick off the Neighborhood Watch Program was well attended for a first-time event in the area. A National Night Out celebration was organized, and with the help of Target Corporation funding and volunteers, the event was extremely successful with over 100 people in attendance. The Neighborhood Watch group has grown so much that in 2007 it was necessary to split into three separate groups. The president of the original group is serving as a mentor for the new presidents of the expanded groups. As a means of keeping the lines of communication open with the residents, a quarterly newsletter is now being sent out from the Police Department.

Goal #2 – Positive Choices for Children

Research and conversation with school district officials confirmed that over 600 school-age children lived in the corridor, were part of immigrant or minority families, had nothing to do after school or in the summer, and were not participating in available community or school programs. Efforts to inform the parents of available programs were hindered due to several problems, the most important being language barriers to written information and permission slips. For a short term solution to getting the children off the streets for the summer of 2006, the stakeholders identified existing positive summer programs for the children to be engaged in outside the Corridor. Hopkins Police Chief Craig Reid, along with individuals from the Hopkins Public Schools and Hennepin County, submitted grant requests for funding for these 2006 summer programs.

In the spring of 2006, a total of \$30,000 in funding was received from the Hopkins Rotary Club, the Hopkins School District, Community Education, and The Park Nicollet Foundation for summer programs for the Blake Road Corridor children. The organizers did not try to invent new programs but provided scholarships and transportation to quality programs already offered by local non-profit organizations such as the YMCA, the faith community and public schools. The efforts to inform parents about the summer and after-school programs available were not very successful.

Cost, transportation, and language barriers to written information and permission slips posed problems for many. Grant money was used to hire Somali, Hispanic, and minority women to contact residents door-to-door and explain the summer programs being offered. This was the key element that made the first year successful with 74% of the children participating in the programs. Because of the limited funding available, the effort in 2006 was directed at Kindergarten through 5th grade children living in the Corridor. Volunteers from the school district and local churches helped organize parents and children throughout the summer months to insure that everyone participating in a program made it to their bus for transportation to and from their home.

In 2007, the program expanded to include junior and senior high students. An additional after-school program was also developed in 2007 with the cooperation of the management company of one of the larger apartment complexes, CampFire USA, and local members of the faith community. The Hopkins Public School District Community Education Department agreed to take over supervision and coordination of all after-school and summer programs in the Corridor effective in 2007. A single multi-lingual permission slip and registration form was developed in cooperation with several non-profit and school programs to ease the problems of registering children from immigrant families for these programs. Funding for the after-school and summer programs come from Schools & Communities in Partnership (SCIP), which is the Hopkins School District's Family Services Collaborative, The Park Nicollet Foundation, and state grants.

Goal #3 – Improve Infrastructure & Provide Needed Services

A nuisance property program was put in place in 2002 to deal with problem rental properties. However, without stricter penalties for violations, dealing with repeat violators was difficult. Officers would refer repeat call locations to the Police Services Liaison, who would track the number of calls, then refer the complaints to the Housing Inspector for follow-up letters to the renters and property owners. However, a more comprehensive program was needed.

The City Housing Inspector, City Building Official, Police Services Liaison and Assistant City Manager together began researching best practices to enhance the city rental ordinance to improve enforcement capabilities and accountability of rental property owners citywide. With the help of property owners and neighborhood support and input, a revised rental ordinance was approved by the City Council the first part of 2008.

The revised ordinance requirements included applicant screening and criminal history of prospective tenants, use of the Crime-Free Drug-Free Lease Addendum, increased inspection of rental units, and education and training for landlords and property owners. An increased fee structure was developed to pay for an additional Housing Inspector, who was hired in 2008. This additional inspector conducts routine inspections of smaller units such as the duplexes along the Blake Road Corridor. A system of rewards for property owner compliance and cooperation was built into the fee/penalty structure.

In addition, several city departments have stepped forward to revitalize the Hopkins Apartment Managers Association (HAMA). This group of rental property owners and managers meet regularly to discuss rental issues, receive training on various topics such as property management and the Crime-Free Multi-Housing Program.

In 2008, the City Economic Development Department undertook a special Small Area Plan to help guide long term development of infrastructure and facilities needs in the Corridor. The City contributed \$10,000 for the plan and they received \$40,000 from Hennepin County Corridor Planning for this endeavor. The first public meeting was held in August of 2008 with over 40 attendees. Favorite and least favorite aspects of the Corridor were identified and guiding principles were determined. A meeting with the Somali community was held in October of 2008 to get input from them on what physical improvements they wanted to see in their neighborhood.

An open house was held where the draft plan was presented in January of 2009 and the final plan went to the City Council in May of 2009. The major recommendations of the plan dealt with opportunities for green connections, redevelopment of the area to add more housing and less commercial sites, and streetscaping with the addition of sidewalks, crosswalks, and lighting. The City of Hopkins received a county grant for sidewalk additions. A new sidewalk was installed along the east of Blake Road in 2009.

The Hopkins Minnetonka Family Resource Center received a \$150,000 grant from the Local Initiatives Support Corporation to hire an intern to coordinate the social service needs of the Corridor residents. Since transportation is an issue for the residents, the Resource Center is in the process of looking for space to set up a storefront once a week in the Corridor.

The Hopkins Police Department is participating in the Joint Community Police Partnership (JCPP) program, a collaborative effort of the cities of Brooklyn Center, Brooklyn Park, Hopkins and Richfield, Hennepin County, and the Northwest Hennepin Human Services Council. The JCPP mission is to enhance communication and understanding between law enforcement officers and multicultural residents. Special “neighborhood” meetings for immigrant groups are held on a regular basis. Hopkins receives \$110,000 each year to fund a staff liaison position and a half-time Cadet position to be filled by a member of a minority group. While this program is for city-wide outreach and not only for the Blake Road Corridor, it is the experience the police had on Blake Road that showed the need for this program to exist in Hopkins.

Conclusion

The engagement of a wide variety of people from the community, the city, and the police department to form the Stakeholders Group was a critical key to the success of the Blake Road Corridor Project. Use of the Wilder Foundation to conduct their in-depth study assured participants of a fair and impartial look at the situation. Quality after-school and summer programs for children provided a safe and fun learning environment. Efforts to reduce crime have resulted in a drop in crime rates. Violent crime was down 21% in 2006, and in 2007, Part I and Part II crimes in the Corridor were down 25%. Stiffer rental ordinance regulations and code enforcement has improved the quality of life for residents in the corridor. Rental turnover rates dropped to 33% in 2007 compared to 58% in 2005. The Wilder Research report states 84% of the residents identified the quality of life in the Corridor in 2007 as “very good” or “good”.

There are neighborhoods like the Blake Road Corridor in every city in our nation. It doesn't matter if it's a large metropolis or a small rural community. We have all seen a rise in the

immigrant population and the difficulties that come as we try to blend a variety of cultures together. Most cities have the same resources available to them (after-school and summer school programming, Neighborhood Watch, National Night Out, the Crime-Free Multi-Housing program, local city ordinances, etc.) that the City of Hopkins had. What made it all work was the determination of the city officials, the school district, the county officials, and the community.