

A Neighborhood Impact Statement: Changing the Burden of Proof

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There has been a great deal of effort to persuade local institutions to reach out to the local citizenry and to engage them in participating in decision-making. This process usually leaves the decision as to which decisions citizens should be involved in to the institutional actor. The local citizenry is responding to the institutional agenda. This process usually leaves the decision as to which decisions citizens should be engaged in to the institutions. Citizens are responders rather than definers, advisors rather than deciders.

An alternative could be the development of a Neighborhood Impact Statement modeled on Environmental Impact Statements. The Environmental Impact Statement places the burden of proof on the outside intervener. The intervention into the natural environment must be tested against a set of standards. The assumption is that to intervene in the natural environmental order, institutions must prove in advance the nature of the impacts of their proposals.

Similarly, the neighborhood is a social environment where the proposed institutional intervener should have to demonstrate in advance positive impacts measured against local community standards. Instead of the local citizenry having to depend on institutional decisions as to those questions for engagement, the burden of proof would be shifted so that citizen standards would be the given and the institutional impacts would be assessed against them.

A Neighborhood Impact Statement could be developed by a coalition of neighborhood associations. They would define the areas of potential impact and the standards to be used to evaluate the impact.

One possible method of developing a statement would be to focus on the three major kinds of intervening institutions – businesses, not-for-profits and government. For each of these, a set of values and standards could be created by the local citizen coalition.

A beginning example of possibilities might be:

Businesses

1. What will be the effects of the intervention on exiting local enterprises?
2. Effects on local employment as well as new jobs
3. Effects on public social life
4. Effects on the physical environment
5. Effects on local newspapers and community based media

Not-For-Profits

1. Will the initiative replace or support neighborhood functions?
2. Will the intervention enhance local jobs and enterprises?
3. Will local citizens have the final decision regarding the intervention?
4. Will the intervention identify and utilize local assets?

Government

1. What will the job and enterprise impacts be?
2. Will the intervention increase capacity of citizens to perform functions?
3. Will citizens have the power to veto the intervention?

This is a limited “starter” list of neighborhood values and issues related to proposed interventions of institutions. The key to developing an effective Neighborhood Impact Statement is that it be developed by neighbors at the block level where effects on family and the local social contract is experienced. An overarching question might be, does this intervention enhance the capacity of local residents to perform functions that are the basis for wellbeing.

One measure of the effectiveness of a Neighborhood Impact Statement would be its effect on the status and functions of local residents. A continuum that defines local citizen power and status is this sequence:

Most Powerful
Producer
Advocate
Advisor
Client/Consumer
Victim
Least Powerful

Traditional engagement initiatives assume the preferred status of neighbors is as client/consumer and advisor. These forms of engagement do not involve neighbors as decider/producer. Therefore, they are actually not citizen engagement because the resident has none of the basic powers of a citizen.