

THE SEATTLE CITY MATCHING FUND AND CIVIC LIFE

By: Dave Bockmann
February 2003

In the Fremont neighborhood of Seattle, under the north end of the Aurora Street Bridge, sits a gigantic troll. One hand clasps a real Volkswagen automobile. A menacing eye watches over the scene.



Fremont Troll

In 1990, when the Fremont Troll was proposed as a Neighborhood Matching Fund project, professional art critics reacted in horror. It is "bad art...a cement monstrosity," one wrote. Why she asked, were people from the neighborhood allowed to choose a piece of public art without the guidance of professional artists?

Why indeed?

The Aurora Bridge that soars over the Fremont neighborhood is well designed and gracefully constructed. Underneath the bridge, however, it's another story. The site where the troll now sits was "a smelly, rat-infested eyesore" strewn with litter, according to neighborhood activists. They decided art was the answer to this problem. The Fremont Neighborhood Arts Council put together a jury of neighbors who chose five potential works of art for the site. Models were made and displayed at the local Neighborhood Service Center and at the neighborhood library. The troll was the people's choice in a neighborhood vote.

The Seattle Neighborhood Matching Fund Program

The Fremont Troll is just one of 1,500 Neighborhood Matching Fund projects funded by the City of Seattle in the past 12 years. In all, the City has awarded nearly \$20 million in public funds to 700 different neighborhood groups to spend as they see fit.

The projects range from those costing a few hundred dollars to those costing several-hundred-thousand-dollars. Some were finished in a few weeks. Some were completed in stages over several years. The groups ranged from well established neighborhood organizations with decades of experience, to small ad hoc groups of neighbors who came together for a single purpose.

Neighborhood organizations have used the Neighborhood Matching Fund to tackle neighborhood problems like graffiti, crime, traffic safety, decaying business districts, neglected parks and public spaces, polluted urban streams, deteriorating sidewalks, and unsafe bus stops.

Completed Matching Fund projects include public art like the Fremont Troll, dozens of



A Farmers Market

murals, Farmers' Markets that have revitalized neighborhoods,

community gardens,

neighborhood traffic control, creation or restoration of neighborhood parks, public playgrounds, one-time neighborhood events, neighborhood technology centers,

programs for youth and neighborhood plans.

All of the funded projects have been undertaken by volunteer groups and nearly all have been successful. They have changed the face of Seattle, and they have changed the way City government and City Departments view the participation of citizens in civic affairs.

The Department of Neighborhoods

Before the creation of the Department of Neighborhoods, it seemed, and it was probably true, the City's focus was on the downtown central business district. Certainly, the leaders of Seattle's neighborhoods were unhappy with a lack of access to neighborhood programs. And Seattle has many neighborhoods.

Although the city isn't large--the population is just over 1/2 million--there are 100 recognized neighborhoods in Seattle. Seattleites feel strongly about their neighborhoods and identify themselves by the neighborhood in which they live. Were you to ask one of them where they are from, they're as likely to give you the name of their neighborhood as to say they are from Seattle.

Neighborhood Associations

Nearly every Seattle neighborhood has a neighborhood community council and in many there are neighborhood-based business associations, community based social service programs and other neighborhood-based groups. All told, there are at least 300 neighborhood based organizations in the City.

It was the leaders of these Neighborhood groups that pressured the City Council¹ to find ways to provide access to city money for neighborhood programs. The Council responded, in 1988, by creating the Department of Neighborhoods and, in 1989, the Neighborhood Matching Fund program.

In its first year, the Neighborhood Matching Fund was budgeted at only a few-hundred- thousand dollars. However, the program proved to be so popular that the annual allocation was quickly increased to \$1.5 million. Then, in 1998, a new Seattle mayor was elected on a platform that promised to triple the Fund to \$4.1 million.

The Neighborhood's "Match"

To secure an award from the Fund, the neighborhood group must agree to match the City's contribution to the project. The neighborhood "match" can be in the form of cash, but most often it is in the form of volunteer labor which is valued at \$12 per hour, or donated professional services which are valued at the going professional rate.

Since the program's inception, the Department of Neighborhoods has documented over 580,000 hours of volunteer time contributed to neighborhood projects. Moreover, the neighborhood contribution to Matching Fund projects, counting volunteer labor, professional services, donated materials and cash exceeds the City's contribution by half.

The decision to fund, or not fund, a proposed neighborhood project, rests with a

¹ Seattle is governed by an elected nine member City Council. The Mayor, responsible for administration of City programs and Departments is elected independently of the Council.

panel of citizens representing the city's 13 districts. And, while the Mayor or the City Council can reverse the recommendations of the citizens' panel, they have never done so.

Success of the Neighborhood Matching Fund

Seattle's Neighborhood Matching Fund program has been an unqualified success. It has been copied by 40 other cities in the U.S. and by cities outside the U.S. And although 12 years ago the vote by the City Council to start the program was close, today the Neighborhood Matching Fund has the unanimous support of all Council members. Former Mayor Schell, gives the following reasons for the program's popularity among politicians, bureaucrats and citizens:

- It has dramatically increased the number of people who are active in their communities.
- It has given neighborhood organizations the resources they needed to move from a reactive position to one of taking responsibility for their communities.
- Because each project is carried out in collaboration with one or more City Departments, the departments involved have been offered opportunities to develop better relationships with the neighborhoods involved.
- Allowing a non-cash "match" opens the projects to everyone, and targeted outreach and technical assistance has resulted in the money going where needs are greatest.
- With responsible funding recommendations being made by neighborhood representatives, decision making occurs outside the political

arena and elected officials can be identified with successful projects rather than with un-funded applications.

Volunteerism And Civic Life

Although Seattle's Neighborhood Matching Fund program is relatively new, the involvement of American citizens in initiating and undertaking community improvement projects is not. As political scientist Harry Boyte¹ has pointed out, during the formative years of America, citizenship was equated with public work.

As he puts it, citizenship was understood not as the "high-minded, virtuous, and leisure time activity of gentlemen." Rather it was the down-to-earth labors of ordinary people undertaking projects of public benefit. Citizenship is public work.

Public work, as defined by Boyte, is a "visible effort by a mix of people that produces things of lasting importance to communities and society...and a deep stake in governance"

One writer who observed Americans' "deep stake in governance" was Alexis de Tocqueville, the young Frenchman who visited the U.S. some 170 years ago (1831). His monumental study, published as "Democracy in America," is still valid in describing the relationship between American citizens and their government. Tocqueville wrote:

"The citizen of the United States is taught from his earliest infancy to rely upon his own exertions...he looks upon social authority [government] with an eye of mistrust and anxiety, and he only claims its assistance when he is quite unable to shift without it."

As Tocqueville observed Americans were mistrustful of government and were more likely to form a civil association to tackle a problem than they were to call upon government to solve it for them. This observation is still true today: there are over 1.5 million incorporated non-profit organizations in the U.Sⁱⁱ. and, perhaps, twice that many unincorporated ones.

Boyte believes Americans have forgotten that citizenship is “public work undertaken by a mix of people producing things of lasting importance.” Instead, “good” citizenship has been re-defined as participating in elections and in sharing values in common with other community members.

Seattle grassroots’ neighborhood leaders would beg to disagree. They have resisted this trend and are collaborating with their City government to re-institute the concept of public work as citizenship through the Neighborhood Matching Fund program.

As Lezlie Jane, a neighborhood artist who has helped her neighbors design and construct three new neighborhood parks (including Cormorant Park) along Seattle’s waterfront told me, “no where else in the world can ordinary citizens just go out and build a new park.” In a letter to the City Council, Ms Jane continued this thought. She told them, the Matching Fund program,

“...has made it possible for me to rally the community to create two waterfront parks in West Seattle...and the restoration and protection of a third...The volunteer effort in creating these parks has been powerful and impressive. Hundreds of individuals and numerous groups and businesses within our community have been involved. The total Neighborhood Matching Fund

match generated for all three parts combined is well over half a million dollars”.

And, as the art critic who panned the



Cormorant Park

Fremont Troll eventually admitted, the people were right. The troll she says is a "landmark, a Fremont classic."

It is also one of the most popular pieces of public art in Seattle.

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For more information about the Neighborhood Matching Fund program, see the Seattle Department of Neighborhoods website:

<http://www.seattle.gov/neighborhoods/nmf/>

ⁱ Source: Boyte, Harry C with Kari, Nancy; Building America: The Democratic Promise of Public Work

ⁱⁱ Source: The Urban Institute Center on Non-Profits and Philanthropy