

**Rockford Choice Neighborhoods
Task Force & Community Meeting Summary – April 23, 2012**

Leadership Session, Rockford Housing Authority Offices (Afternoon)

Purpose: Recap first Task Force meeting, discuss issues, assets and needs of the community and begin preliminary visioning process.

- Presentation by Les Pollock, Principal, Camiros who reviewed the project team, the Choice Neighborhoods program and the planning area.
- The initial goals of the Ellis Heights project are to transform Ellis Heights into a neighborhood of opportunity and choice; rebuild Fairgrounds Valley as part of an integrated plan for revitalizing the neighborhood; and act as a catalyst for investments in neighborhood revitalization to improve the overall quality of life for residents.
- The overall approach to the program will use experts to facilitate planning, but have community residents and Task Force members become responsible for attaining its planning vision.
- This meeting begins the “issues and needs” phase of the project. It is phase two of a six phase process that will take approximately eighteen months to complete.
- Community challenges have been identified, such as the age of housing stock, levels of blight, lack of commercial assets, presence of absentee landlords and lack of entrepreneurship opportunities.
- Since the prior task force meeting, Camiros has facilitated conversations with key stakeholders, performed a building condition survey and created a substantial neighborhood data book.
- The data book provides background on land use and existing conditions, demographics, transportation, economic development and jobs, education and public safety. A series of maps from the data book were shown to the Task Force to provide background on the neighborhood using the most current data. This information was culled from the US Census, Winnebago County, Rockford Metropolitan Agency for Planning, City of Rockford and from surveys performed by Camiros.
- The Task Force was introduced to innovative neighborhood planning models through four short films: Fresh Moves Mobile Produce Market (Garfield Park, Chicago, IL), The Village at Market Creek (San Diego, CA), Beeline/Sweet Beginnings (North Lawndale, Chicago, IL) and Evergreen Co-op (Cleveland, OH).

Ron Clewer (Rockford Housing Authority) provided an update on local projects, including a program to bring healthy foods to public housing residents via bus and a “walking school bus” that uses a parent/guardian to walk with a group of children to and from school.

Discussion: What would you do in the Ellis Heights/Fairgrounds Neighborhood?

- Create a clothing exchange similar to the Mobile Produce Market that would allow adults and children to donate and receive gently used clothes.
- Use Evergreen Co-op model in Rockford to create a commercial laundry that would serve Rockford area hospitals and assisted living facilities. Currently commercial laundry facilities are outsourced to businesses in Milwaukee.
- Encourage business ownership by motivating local residents. Ron Clewer noted that the RHA has established escrow accounts for public housing residents so they can build their savings. This service will allow RHA residents to eventually build their own businesses.
- Provide entrepreneurship coaching to local residents.

- Address/demolish vacant buildings that are in poor condition.
- Provide more services to incarcerated residents that are returning to the community.
- Encourage residents to take pride in the community by performing weed and trash clean up. Ron Clewer noted that the City of Rockford has looked into this program, but that the biggest issue is liability. Rockford does not have a reputation as a clean city so any cleanup programs would have a positive effect. Another way to take pride in the changes that are coming to the community is to show that work is being done by installing signs that say “Future Home of....”
- Teach local residents handyman and landscaping services so that they will learn basic skills with tools and eventually be able to take on bigger jobs as their skills grow.
- Co-ops/Cooperatives are scalable programs that build investment over time to generate wealth and provide sustainable opportunities into the future.
- Bring in programs that build investments and produce major impacts that will keep providing returns to the community well into the future. Ron Clewer noted that the RHA’s mobile food program satisfies an immediate need, and that it is a program that can be built on for larger projects in the future.
- Find a way to tap into local businesses that recognize the importance of revitalizing the areas around downtown Rockford.
- Co-locate neighborhood farmers markets and flea markets. The State St and Avon St intersection could serve as a good home for the farmers market. It might be possible to coordinate with Angelic Organic to work on a community gardens program.
- Create a resource guide of all of the service providers that are available to the community.
- A wish for the community is to purchase approximately one block of the neighborhood in a central location and develop a multi-use community campus that includes computers, a fitness center, and other amenities that appeal to all age groups.
- Capitalize on the Chicago movement to put healthy food in convenience stores.
- Increase jobs and skills training. Provide administrative and secretarial skills similar to the OIC Vocational Institute that was formerly located in Rockford. Ron Clewer noted that the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) has financial opportunity centers for working families.
- Foster pride in the community by focusing on the youngest members of the neighborhood. For example, providing places for young people to hang out after school and on weekends. Youth centers provide safe havens for young people to meet up and youth programs to structure their time.
- Difficult to improve the way that some local businesses interact with the community. For example, All Mart (2323 W. State St.) has no interest in selling groceries, fruits and vegetables because it is making a lot of money selling junk food and alcohol. There are suspicions that some convenience stores in the area are also a front for drugs and are not interested in helping the community’s food issues.
- Rock Valley Colleges offer career pathways training in a number of disciplines. General education development (GED) classes are available, as are classes in career field clusters. Classes are offered throughout Rockford and sites can be set up in the Ellis Heights/Fairgrounds area.

Follow Up: Task Force members were asked to email Camiros with any other information that might be pertinent to our discussion

- Kris Kieper or YWCA Rockford suggested that we explore transportation employment entrepreneurship such as the model from Hector Ricketts of New York (http://www.ij.org/images/pdf_folder/economic_liberty/power_of_one_entrepreneur/ricketts-power1.pdf)

- Stephanie Hamblock of Rock Valley College explained that the focus for preparing individuals to pass the GED test has shifted to a GED Bridge or Career Pathways model. This means that while individuals are preparing to obtain their GED, they are receiving specific instruction and/or training specific to a career sector. The pathways model provides steps for an individual to work, while obtaining higher levels of education thus enabling them to have higher earning potential. For example, a GED Healthcare Bridge class would include GED preparation and exposure to career fields in healthcare, and basic healthcare skills and terminology, which would lead to certified nursing assistant (CNA) certification, then while employed as a CNA continue training to become a licensed practical nurse (LPN), then further training to become a registered nurse (RN).
- **Next Steps:** Task Force was asked to think about any issues/needs that we might have missed; any other projects/models that might be applicable; and the overall vision for the neighborhood.
- **Next Task Force Meeting:** May 17, 2012 at 3:00 PM



Les Pollock of Camiros, presents the goals and approaches of the Choice Neighborhoods program



Camiros introduced four short films that explored innovative neighborhood planning models



Ron Clewer of the Rockford Housing Authority helps lead the Task Force discussion



Task Force members participating in the discussion session