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By DANIEL STURM

Well the eggs chase the bacon round the fryin' pan and the whinin' dog pigeons by the steeple bell rope and the dogs tipped the garbage pails over last night and there's always construction work bothering you In the neighborhood, In the neighborhood, In the neighborhood

— Tom Waits, 1982

When recoiling from the scary, depressing environment of national and world politics, the neighborhood represents a social space that is still positive and believable. Imagine the potlucks, the garage sales, the friendly neighborhood card games. Neighbors even donate blood together, and rally together for peace.

A study has recently been conducted at Michigan State University, which aims to measure “sense of community” in Mid-Michigan. MSU urban affairs Professor John Schweitzer heads a team of researchers who have conducted more than 400 interviews. They studied nine neighborhoods in Lansing, Grand Rapids and Flint. Leading a separate and parallel research team, urban affairs Professor June Thomas followed by examining the role of local governments in community development and neighborhood participation. Together, the researchers have come up with some surprising findings.

Lansing touts itself as a “world class city,” a title that’s been poked fun at by the BBC’s “Guide to Life, the Universe and Everything” (see here). If not a global metropolis, however, Lansing does deserve brownie points for having healthy neighborhoods. According to Schweitzer’s survey data, the city’s residents attend neighborhood meetings more frequently, distribute more newsletters, socialize more often, help more often when neighbors have problems, and volunteer more frequently at school events.

Professor Thomas’ research results found that Lansing neighborhoods have a better relationship with their city governments than do neighborhoods in Flint or Grand Rapids. Although Grand Rapids is formally better organized and puts more money into neighborhoods, according to Thomas’ results community residents give Lansing better grades. The mayor’s office was highly rated, as were the Department of Planning and Development and the police. Most community leaders interviewed couldn’t even name a “worst” relationship

After reviewing the survey results at a presentation for Lansing City department heads, mayoral assistant David Wiener commented: “This survey reaffirms that the work we’ve been doing for eight years is effective, and that city government and city leadership has a lot of credibility with neighborhood leaders.” Wiener also said the study contained good suggestions for strengthening the city administrator’s work.

Schweitzer said that the three neighborhoods in each city, which they’d chosen for study, weren’t necessarily representative of all neighborhoods. But they were comparable, because each had predominantly single-family dwellings. And each continues to deal with common urban problems that have been destabilizing over the last 40 years.

The Sense of Community research project was born from the frustration of several neighborhood association leaders who were concerned about the low level of community participation in their neighborhood, Schweitzer said. The Lansing neighborhoods they studied were Wexford in south Lansing; Knollwood/Willow in north Lansing, and Baker Donora in south Lansing; Creston, West Grand, and the Southwest Area in Grand Rapids; and Eldridge Street, Northwest, and North Point in Flint. Fifty residents were surveyed in each neighborhood, and during the summer and early fall of 2001, 451 face-to-face interviews were conducted.

The researchers have hypothesized that people living in socially connected neighborhoods feel happier about their lives. They have also assumed for the study that being a good neighbor and connecting with others on your block not only improves the neighborhood but also helps individuals. The goal of the study was to better understand the “ingredients” of neighborhood sense of community: What factors lead urban neighborhood residents to get involved in their neighborhood association?

Schweitzer said one might expect income level, percentage of rentals, crime rate, educational backgrounds, or the length of time that people have lived in the neighborhood to matter. The researchers, however, found that these factors were only slightly related to sense of community. What really mattered was the level of socializing.

Residents were asked about their own interactions with their immediate neighbors and their perceptions of the sense of community that the immediate neighbors had with one another. Researchers also measured the respondents’ knowledge of their neighborhood organizations, their prior involvement and activities in the neighborhood, their feelings about the collective efficacy of the neighborhood as a whole, and their reactions to neighborhood issues and concerns. Finally, they asked questions about the individual respondent’s previous civic involvement, length and residency status, and other individual demographic information.

They found out that the most important individual factor in predicting neighborhood involvement was the degree of prior volunteerism. They also found that what really defines a good social network is the sense of community among immediate neighbors. “The unit of analysis is typically something like a census tract, like 5,000 people,” Schweitzer said. “But contrary to those statistical units we found that the block is the most important unit. What really matters is the relationship to the houses you can see from your front steps. We found it over and over again.” Schweitzer argued that people don’t really care about the larger neighborhood. This was even more evident in neighborhoods where historical boundaries no longer matched those of the present community, due to construction of a highway or factory segregating one section of the neighborhood from another.

“It’s a little bit like Congress,” Schweitzer said. “People have a negative opinion about Congress, but they like their own member of Congress.” People seemed to feel better about their block than about the whole neighborhood. Research data suggested that there was a lot of variation in sense of community from block to block.

Schweitzer suggests that instead of viewing neighborhoods as large units, city planners should focus on what he calls the 100-block “micro neighborhoods.” The “100 block” is defined as the residences on a given street having addresses that fall within the 100-level range — for example, all residences between 100 and 199 on Maple Avenue.

Funded by the Families and Communities Together grant, the MSU Extension College and the Institute for Children, Youth and Family, the Sense of Community project is moving into a second phase. Schweitzer is testing three strategies within a 31-block radius to try to improve people’s sense of community. In conjunction with neighborhood associations, researchers have created a community handbook, and block map directory and are encouraging neighbors to organize social activities within a block, rather than on a neighborhood level. The Center of Urban Affairs also plans to conduct ethnographic studies in eight-block areas that have a high sense of community, to see how this feeling first developed and how it’s sustained.

Corey Warren, a graduate assistant,, has begun conducting interviews in the so-called Place Neighborhood (Prospect, Lathop, Allen, Clifford, Eureka) south of Michigan Avenue. She plans to look for patterns of social connection and relationships and trust by drawing lines from house to house. Warren said that for her, conducting interviews was a pleasant experience, because people are generally trusting and “really enjoy talking about their neighbors. And I think they are extremely honest.”

Measuring “sense of community” has also taken on unconventional strategies. In one neighborhood, Sense of Community researchers counted the number of recycling bins on a particular block. “The stronger the sense of community on the street neighborhood, the higher is the recycling participation,” Schweitzer concluded.

There was also a positive correlation between pro-civic behavior, such as voting, volunteering, recycling, or giving blood, and sense of community. And in an instance where the actual crime rate was the same on two blocks, people on the block with a higher sense of community felt much safer. Adolescent males on blocks with a higher sense of community were less likely to engage in delinquency. Interestingly, neighborhoods that organized crime watches also had a lesser feeling of safety, than did others.

The Sense of Community Team handbook, called “A Guide To Successful Neighboring,” is supposed to act as a practical guide for making one’s neighborhood “friendly and cheerful.” It includes 50 possible strategies for making a connection with neighbors. For example:

- Get neighborhood kids to help you clean up a park. Provide them with gloves and garbage bags and watch them go to work.
- Leave cut flowers in a jar on the sidewalk with a “take one” sign.
- Visit a farmer’s market and bring fresh produce to a homebound neighbor.
- Ask a longtime resident for stories of your block from times gone by.
- Plant a small garden for an elderly neighbor, or even just a potted tomato plant. Have neighborhood children help you.

When they received the report, the three Lansing neighborhood organizations involved in the study were surprised about some of the results. Here are their responses:

Baker Donora Focus Center

“The MSU study showed that neighbors really cared about their programs, like the kids safe night, school picnics, or block parties,” said Anita Money penny , director of the Baker Donora Focus Center, who moved to Lansing from Detroit in 1988. On the other hand, she said, the study found that many people didn’t know about the services offered. To get the word out, Money penny decided to publish a newsletter monthly instead of bimonthly. The paper has a circulation of 1,500 copies.

Baker Donora is a low-income neighborhood, with 70 percent of residents renting their homes. The neighborhood center’s building is located next to a park and offers a variety of community support services. These include parenting classes for young fathers, aid in taking family members to the doctor, support for residents threatened with eviction, and a center telephone that can be used for free. Recently, the center started a program for seniors called “shaking baking,” that addresses issues such as health, exercise, nutrition, safety and home-repair. Thirty-six active seniors get together on Tuesday and Thursday from 9 a.m. until noon. Last year, neighborhood volunteers distributed 66,700 pounds of food to 987 homes, worth \$70,000. The food was collected by the Lansing-based organization, Food Movers.

Money penny, who works full time, and has two part-time associates, says that she never thought about money when she left a well-paid job to become a community activist. “The money really isn’t the thing, it’s the work within the neighborhood that makes me happy.”

Thomas said that neighborhood activists in other cities, such as Grand Rapids, Cleveland, Philadelphia and Detroit, were often full-time staff and were paid much higher salaries. Grand Rapids makes available more than \$500,000 in grants for neighborhood associations. The Lansing Mayor’s Neighborhood Grant program offers only \$90,000.

In her final report, entitled “Local Government and Citizen Participation,” Thomas concluded that City of Lansing provides neighborhood associations with executive assistance but relatively little money. Lansing, Grand Rapids, and Flint had varying levels of funding available for neighborhoods, but in each city, community respondents were not satisfied with current funding. Many of the eleven Lansing community leaders Thomas interviewed were surprised when they heard how much more their colleagues earned. “Maybe they don’t know their options,” Thomas said.

Wexford Network Center

The director of the Wexford Network Center, Ann Mellen, says she could use some more money. “We would really like to do more youth tutoring, but we would need funding for a full-time coordinator,” she said. The center, which Mellen calls the “Grand Central Station,” is located in the community school building, and focuses on after-school programs.

Two thirds of the 250 Wexford students qualify to receive a free lunch at school. The network center offers advice and refers families to health care programs, and they offer a safe place for kids after school. Currently 10 high school students attend additional math, science, and reading programs designed for at risk students. There’s also a child-care program for 30 kids.

Drawing her own conclusions from MSU’s research, Mellen said she learned that it “takes a great deal of patience” to become an important part of the neighborhood’s life. Before the network center was opened in 1999, people already had yard sales, block parties and friendly chats on the sidewalks with their neighbors. “Our center was the new kid on the block,” she said. When she first started a family craft night, she felt discouraged because nobody came. Today the event is well accepted and takes place every third Monday of the month. The next Family Craft Night is scheduled for 6 p.m. to 8.30 p.m. May 9.

Wexford Network Center supports the efforts of the community’s two neighborhood organizations, Churchill Downs and Wexford Heights, which each have monthly board meetings. The center has three full-time and five part-time staff and helps the neighborhood associations with grant writing, typing board agenda minutes, and copying flyers. Three thousand newsletters are being distributed to residents of Churchill Downs, and 150 to residents of the much smaller neighborhood, Wexford Heights. Every Tuesday and Thursday people meet at the quarter-mile walking trail behind the school building, created by volunteers in 2000. On these days the Network Center stays open until 8 p.m.

North Network Center

The North Network Center’s director, Walter Brown, said he could confirm the Sense of Community study’s findings that there was a good relationship between community leaders and Lansing city officials. Brown said that in Grand Rapids community activists are less happy: “They may have more things to complain about in Grand Rapids. We don’t,” he said. Brown said that in Lansing, city officials were always willing to attend meetings when the neighborhood associations asked them to come.

At the North Network Center, sense of community grew out of a crisis situation. Six years ago, when Brown was president of the Willow Neighborhood Association, he saw children sell crack in his neighborhood, and he decided he should do something about it. The Network Center, which Brown has directed for three years, formed a coalition of concerned neighbors who began working closely with the police. In the last five years, drugs in the neighborhood have been reduced by 70 percent.

The North Network Center is five years old and combines the efforts of Knollwood/Willow, Old Forest and Walnut Neighborhood Associations. So it serves a large community. The Northside newsletter has a circulation of 3,000. Brown said that children in this predominantly low-income don’t get to travel and see places enough. So he takes them on camping trips and excursions to Frederick Meijer Sculpture Gardens. Last year, the center painted 14 houses and the corner store, and the storeowner contributed drinks and ice cream in exchange.

Sixty-five percent of the North Network Center’s residents are homeowners. It offer an afterschool program and advises residents on how to become homeowners. Almost obligatory, the center also has frequent ice-cream socials and barbecues. Brown says that the afterschool program has highest priority, and its funding was safe. Judy Garland, Lansing’s Network Center coordinator and an MSU extension agent, said that all five Lansing network centers also offer free legal services and tenant and parenting workshops. The Northwest Lansing Healthy Communities Initiative is creating a neighborhood map, which will list helpful addresses and services.

The Sense of Community team has even started a “Friendliest Block Contest.” The goal is to identify all of the “friendliest blocks” in the city to learn how to help in creating “friendly blocks.” Some examples of “friendliest blocks” are those that meet informally for anything from potlucks to gardening, whose trusting neighbors have exchanged spare keys, neighborhoods that have become like extended family.

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