

LINDEN HILLS NRP PHASE I REVIEW: 1994-2004 (SUMMARY)

Linden Hills NRP Phase I: By the Numbers

First Linden Hills NRP planning focus groups conducted: June, 1994

Date City Council approved Linden Hills' NRP First Step Plan: December 29, 1995

Date City Council approved Linden Hills' Phase I Action Plan: May 8, 1998

Date of Celebration of Completion of Phase I: January 27, 2004

Number of separate strategies in the Action Plan: 49

Number of strategies with allocated funding when plan was written: 37

Number of strategies ultimately undertaken, and partially or fully implemented: 37

Number of modifications to the Action Plan: 20

Number of Linden Hills homes improved with NRP funds: 45

Number of cubic yards of chipped buckthorn removed from private property: about 277

Number of Linden Hills playgrounds with new equipment, funded by NRP: 3

Amount of Phase I NRP funding: \$1.76 million

Amount of funding encumbered or expended to date: \$1,752,269.50 (99%)

Total additional funding, volunteer labor, services, etc. leveraged with NRP funds: \$3.4 million

Total number of hours in a year of 40-hour workweeks: 2,080

Total hours Linden Hills volunteers spent in NRP-related committee meetings and implementing NRP strategies between 1994 and 2003 (roughly estimated): 14,975



In 1998, neighborhood volunteers installed new playground equipment at Lake Harriet –Upper Campus, funded by the NRP.

Overview of Linden Hills Action Plan and Plan Review:

Background and Focus of Phase I Action Plan

Linden Hills' association with the NRP began in 1994, when a colorfully renovated playground was built at the Linden Hills Park, with a \$197,000 grant of NRP Transition Funds. This playground replaced older, less safe and less appealing equipment. Bob Miller, NRP Executive Director said that at the time he felt this wasn't what the neighborhood really needed. Though skeptical, he sat back and let the NRP process of neighborhood control play out. One day, not long after installation of the new playground, Bob was astounded to drive by the park and see throngs of families playing and talking and meeting one another at what had become the heart of the neighborhood--thanks to the new playground. For Bob, and for us, it proved the wisdom of the founding philosophy behind NRP, that neighborhood residents know what their neighborhood needs.

In October, 1995, after a series of community meetings and committee efforts, Linden Hills approved its First Step Plan including tree planting, education/clean up efforts to improve lake water quality, access to school gyms for all residents, funding for the neighborhood newsletter and hiring of a commercial planner. In addition, the NRP-funded Implementation Coordinator launched several "building community" efforts and interest groups (including the Linden Hills Book Club, Linden Hills Babysitting Co-op, and the Linden Hills History Study Group). During the next two and a half years,



1994 Linden Hills NRP kick-off meeting at Lake Harriet – Lower Campus.

while implementing the First Step plan, the neighborhood engaged in significant data gathering and community planning for how best to utilize available Phase I NRP funds. Finally, the neighborhood celebrated formal approval of the NRP Phase I Action Plan in April, 1998.

The overall focus of the Neighborhood Action Plan (NAP) is captured in the vision statement that guided the NRP Steering Committee: "To make Linden Hills a supportive community for residents throughout their lives by the development and implementation of projects which will:

- Enhance the social fabric of the neighborhood and the well-being of all residents;
- Preserve the health and vibrancy of our natural environment;
- Honor and celebrate the richness of our history and heritage;
- Improve the aesthetics and usability of our public spaces;
- Provide pedestrian-friendly transportation alternatives;
- Preserve the local character of our commercial districts, while ensuring their economic health and the diversity of their offerings;
- Build a greater sense of community through the empowerment of Linden Hills' residents, improved communications, and improved governmental relations."

In fact, each of these goals was represented in the NAP which had several projects or strategies under each of the headings: *Building Community, History, Art and Culture, Commercial Districts, Transportation, Public Spaces and Natural Environment*. A complete list of NRP projects can be found on the last page of this summary.

Highlights and Significant Achievements of the Plan:

Just five years after approval of the NAP, over 99% of the \$1.7 allocation is under contract, and about 87% of the funds have been expended. With the enthusiastic participation of many, many volunteers, good coordinator support, and the responsible guidance of the NRP Steering Committee and the Linden Hills Neighborhood Council's Board of Directors, Linden Hills can be proud of its record and overall achievement in implementing its NAP on schedule and with fiscal responsibility.

As a protection neighborhood, Linden Hills received one of the smaller Phase I NRP allocations in the city. It is a tribute to the hard work of Linden Hills volunteers and a comment on the power of the NRP model that with its \$1.7 million allocation Linden Hills leveraged (conservatively calculated) nearly \$1.4 million dollars in other grants, services, volunteer labor, etc. If we include in our equation the \$2 million that the Minneapolis Library contributed to the award-winning remodel of the local branch library, that leveraged number increases to \$3.4 million. This should impress all as a

significant return on their dollar, especially for a city program. A dollar spent in most other city departments rarely ends up doubling its worth.

Some of the highlights of Linden Hills' NRP leveraging power include turning \$5,000 of NRP funds for our Buckthorn removal effort into well over \$40,000 of other grants, volunteer labor, and donated services. Our revolving loan program, consisting of an initial commitment of \$250,000, leveraged another \$206,000 in matching funds from homeowners for home improvements and has "revolved" 1½ times in the process of helping improve 44 different properties. Our \$20,000 NRP contribution to the Spiff the Biffs project, in combination with \$5,000 from each of 4 other neighborhoods leveraged an additional \$227,800 in support, grants and donations and resulted in a stellar, award-winning example of historic preservation.

Before moving on to specific project highlights, it is worth noting one more overarching success of the Phase I plan: It spurred great involvement in the neighborhood. The 2003 Phase I Review survey found that an impressive 26% of the respondents had volunteered for a neighborhood activity, committee, or event in the last 5 years. Original NRP Steering Committee members we spoke with and the first NRP Coordinator also told us that the rise in neighborhood involvement was one of the best outcomes of the Phase I process. Said one, "I believe the most significant achievements have involved members of the neighborhood 'coming together' and 'working together'." Another said without hesitation that the most significant achievement from Phase I was "much greater civic involvement, communication and capacity building. More people have been plugged into the process of improving the neighborhood."

As we see it, the NRP empowered individuals who, in turn, created a functional committee/organizational structure for creating desired changes in the neighborhood. Now, a neighbor who has an idea or a passion has a place to bring that idea, a central group for support, and established avenues for communicating their idea to the neighborhood. This led to some successful projects that simply wouldn't have happened before NRP. For example, a neighbor interested in affordable housing has, though serving on a LHiNC committee and hard work, been instrumental in fostering the first real affordable housing initiative here, working with the neighborhood residents, Metropolitan Council and Mayor Rybak. And when a local family foundation called to solicit proposals, LHiNC already had a

volunteer structure and known neighborhood priorities and so easily submitted 7 proposals within the short two-week window. The foundation funded two of them: \$6,750 for boulevard tree planting and \$1,350 for an extra issue of the newsletter focusing on actions for environmental preservation.

NRP not only spurred participation and involvement, but it inspired and allowed our residents to create truly great works of community value. In 2003, 3 of the 16 finalists for Minneapolis Committee on Urban Environment (CUE) Awards were projects funded in part by Linden Hills NRP: "Down at the Lake" the history book produced by our History Study Group, the renovation of the Linden Hills Library and the renovation of the women's restroom at the Lake Harriet Band Shell, also known as Spiff the Biffs (which ultimately won a CUE Award and 4 other awards). All of these projects are notable not just because of the praise they've received, but because they were driven by volunteer effort and community activism and have increased pride in the neighborhood. Even the library renovation, which was largely funded by the Minneapolis Public Library, was greatly influenced by the ideas and design contributions provided by a hardworking volunteer committee that surveyed the neighborhood for its input. The history book found its way through families to former residents as far as Vancouver and northern California and spurred letters of reminiscence full of local history that are now in the library's special collections.

Other projects deserve highlighting for their achievements in increasing resident knowledge and involvement, creating significant improvement in both the pedestrian safety and appeal of commercial areas, and showing great creativity in problem solving. Among these are:

- **The *Linden Hills Line* newsletter:** Nonexistent prior to NRP, it is now (according to those in our focus groups) the most significant source of news about Linden Hills for most of our residents. A whopping 86% of our 2003 survey respondents said they read the newsletter. The newsletter is produced by volunteers 6 times a year and even provides funds to organized youth groups who make \$400 per issue by delivering the newsletter door to door.
- **The "Thoreau's Woods" or Buckthorn Removal project** is one of the most widely recognized and appreciated of the Linden Hills NRP projects. Residents at the focus groups applauded the project and one said "it was terrific the way it pulled us all together to work on a single problem. Everyone was talking about buckthorn." It was successful on many levels. First, it pulled the community together. Second, it achieved its stated goals of educating the

residents about the problems of invasive species and removing buckthorn from private and public lands. Nearly 20 acres of public lands are buckthorn free and we estimate at least 40% of the buckthorn on private lands has been removed. Third, as mentioned before, it was a leveraging powerhouse. Fourth, it proved that NRP does bring groups together to achieve productive ends (in this case neighborhood organization, MPRB, and the University of Minnesota Extension Center Master Gardeners.) Furthermore, because of our successful effort, the Longfellow neighborhood, Edina, and St. Louis Park have all sought our expertise.



Beard's Plaisance before (left) and after (right) buckthorn removal in 2001. These photos were taken 6 hours apart.

- **The Gym Access Program** proved the ability of neighborhoods to wrestle with difficult issues and reach productive solutions. Residents hotly debated how to provide adequate gymnasium space for youth and adult sports. Should they add a gymnasium to the neighborhood park building and use valuable public green space? Should they build a large, well-appointed gym at the community school and hope that it would "share" with residents? In the end, working closely with the community-minded director of our Community Education program and with the Fulton neighborhood, a large chunk of Fulton NRP money was committed to help build a new gym at the community school and over \$29,000 of Linden Hills NRP money was committed to buy staffing to keep the community school and local high school gyms open after hours for use by the local sports teams. The program has been a success all around and financially efficient, costing only about \$1,200 a year to provide the needed gym space.

- **The 44th Street and 43rd and Upton streetscape improvements** included street bump outs, trees, medians, sidewalks, lights and crosswalks. The two commercial areas attract car traffic from a wide area beyond Linden Hills but are pedestrian destinations as well. Linden Hills wanted to both support the visual appeal and overall viability of the commercial areas as well as increase safety and appeal for pedestrians who leave their cars behind. Though they took untold hours of coordinating on the part of volunteer "champions" of the projects and persistence in the face of some less than supportive Public Works staff, the projects were seen to fruition. Our focus groups reported that though some drivers dislike the medians and circles, traffic is slower and pedestrians are safer.

Though not always easy or quick, it is undeniable that the NRP process has enriched our neighborhood greatly by bringing literally hundreds of residents into the process of improving it. Our work in Phase I proves the overall NRP process works and Linden Hills is well poised to begin the exciting work of planning for Phase II.

For more information, call 926-2906 or check the website, www.linden hills.org. The full Phase I Review document will be available upon request, at the Linden Hills Library, and at the Linden Hills Park Building.

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Our deepest gratitude, however, goes to all the smart, dedicated, involved, and persistent residents and friends of Linden Hills who volunteered along the way. All the good that came from NRP Phase I happened because of you.

–The LHiNC Phase I Review Committee

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