

# Building the Community Nexus

## A Community Centered Approach to Planning and Design

By Steven Bingle

*Recent research indicates that the goals (of producing management efficiencies to deliver community programs and infrastructure and more graduates) can be better achieved through a holistic model that supports the whole family and child by providing better access to wrap around services. Nexus planning is a process through which these services can be planned and coordinated all at once. Included are a full spectrum of the people, programs and places that support the complex systemic structure of child support and community life.*

Every citizen enjoys one or more support services that are usually delivered through a wide range of public, private and not-for-profit agencies. These services include programs that support our basic health, social, cultural, educational, recreational, transportation, safety and other individual and institutional needs. The degree to which these services are effectively delivered is determined by how well they are managed and how accessible they are to the people who need them. To a large degree the complex network of agencies and providers established to deliver these public services is cumbersome and inefficient. With respect to low-income communities, where barriers to access are at their highest, access to the most essential of these services can be critical.

One of the reasons why the delivery of public services is less than perfect is because the process that leads to their implementation is usually disaggregated. For example, in the area of educational services, programs for early childhood education are often managed autonomously from programs aimed at the elementary, middle and high school grade levels. Additionally, programs for vocational, community college and higher education are usually administered through a separate group of independent agen-

cies, and adult literacy programs are most often offered through still another program delivery system. For the underserved population of workers whose livelihood depends on multiple jobs, whose access to technology or literacy training may be challenged, or whose income levels are too low to support private transportation, access to these programs and services is often limited. A new strategy for the planning and distribution of public services must be created to provide for a more equitable and effective means of program delivery.

### Challenge Brings Opportunity

In most cases where a disaggregated delivery system exists, the barriers to change are formidable. Longstanding commitments to existing administrative alliances and physical infrastructure are often prominent obstacles. Community programming is often divided between a wide assortment of elected and appointed bodies, and non-governmental organizations. Each entity is usually responsible for planning, funding, building and operating its own administrative and facilities infrastructure. In order to improve efficiency and quality of services to all citizens, a new model is needed that can create a "nexus" of planning for all of these people, programs and places. This nexus planning

model might include a collaborative entity, call it a *Community Trust*, composed of representatives from many public, not-for-profit and community based organizations, who would share in the responsibility of coordinating the delivery of all community programs and services.

### Why is it called a Nexus?

The "nexus" concept is a programmatic, administrative and physical planning model that is highly integrated in both its design and execution. A fully developed community nexus is conceived as a place where a wide range of programs and services are effectively sited, coordinated and administered in a way that addresses the needs of the people who most need them. The programming and design of programs and facilities that accommodate the full range of community needs must be conceived and developed as part of a common and collective whole. Included in each nexus center could be public open spaces, centers for K-12 education, career and technical training, adult learning, multi-modal transportation and information access, community fitness, visual and performing arts, recycling, emergency refuge, disaster recovery, community health and other services. With a collaborative approach to public and private pro-

gramming, these community nexus centers could also provide walkable access to neighborhood-based farmers markets, community gardens, grocery and dry goods outlets, retail services, and public transit.

### National Issues of Confidence and Trust

Gaps in public confidence exist in many urban and rural communities, resulting in high turnover rates of political officials, including school superintendents and their key administrative staff. In this environment it is often difficult for communities to maintain a common vision for the planning and administration of integrated community services. But a more democratic model that is authentically implemented at the scale of rural villages and urban neighborhoods could help to foster more inclusion and stability.

Any reformation of the economic, management and policy frameworks used to deliver community programs and infrastructure must carry with it a new vision for a desired outcome and a clear theory of change. In the domain of education, this means that the outcomes outlined above would require increased management efficiencies and produce more graduates. Recent research indicates that these goals can be better achieved through a holistic model that supports the whole family and child by providing better access to wrap around services. Nexus planning is a process through which these services can be planned and coordinated all at once. Included are a full spectrum of the people, programs and places that support the complex systemic structure of child support and community life.

Some of the most meaningful planning and design interactions can happen at the scale of the school or neighborhood. One critical part of the puzzle are the spaces where people come together, including buildings housing multiple agencies and programs that are often referred to as neighborhood centers. But a community based nexus of people, programs and places can

deliver more efficient and effective outcomes. When created in collaboration with residents and other local stakeholders who will use them every day, an authentically integrated community nexus can:

- Increase efficiency by reducing duplicative services
- Coordinate and leverage public and private interest and investment
- Increase the power of resident voices to create and manage facilities and programs in their neighborhoods
- Enhance community investment through collaboration among various agencies and institutions that can help support and sustain programs over the long term.
- Increase connectivity between local residents

To more fully explore the synergistic qualities of the community nexus, it may be helpful to review the six domains that encompass the largest segments of individual and community needs. First is the *physical* domain, which includes all built and natural resources, like buildings, bridges, highways and electronic communications infrastructure, as well as natural resources like parks and recreation areas. A second category of assets and needs is contained within the community's *cultural* domain. Included in this category are programs and artifacts related to individual and collective values, including ethnic, religious and aesthetic diversity. The third nexus domain incorporates many of the community's *social* assets and needs. This includes all aspects of human well being, including programs related to health, human services and housing. The fourth component of the integrated system of community assets is contained within the *economic* domain, which incorporates programs, activities and initiatives that are meant to maintain a healthy balance between

financial, human and environmental capital. A fifth domain includes all of the community's organizational programs and services. These include everything from families, small groups, specialty clubs, city and county school boards and councils to a myriad of political parties and other private and civic entities. The domain of organizational activities also incorporates the wide variety of mechanisms through which community issues are deliberated and implemented. A sixth domain of the community nexus incorporates all of its *educational* resources and learning assets, including everything from pre-natal to early childhood, primary, secondary, community college, college, university, adult education and workforce training programs and services.



These combined physical, cultural, social, economic, organizational and educational domains incorporate the community's most vital quality of life resources. Although each domain defines a different set of assets and needs, it is the nexus of interactions between them that can most effectively support the health and well being of the whole community system. When the nexus of planning and design resources is operating at its full potential, all of the community's systems will be operating in a synergistic and harmonious mode. Here educational assets can interact with economic, cultural and social assets – and on and on – to a point where interactions reinforce each other through a living web

## Nexus Neighborhood



Prototype Community Nexus Design

of knowledge, information and communication services.

Above is a visual illustration of how a Community Nexus Center might be organized for a small town or urban neighborhood.

### New Orleans, Louisiana: Building Nexus Neighborhoods

One place where the Nexus model is now taking shape is in the recovery and rebuilding of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. In the development of a new School Facilities Master Plan only 70 of the 127 sites owned by the public school system were needed for K-8 schools and 15 for high schools to meet demographic projections. And since twenty-nine percent of New Orleans citizens do not have access to private transportation, it was important to provide walking access to each



Nexus at dusk

of the nexus sites. So all seventy of the K-8 school/nexus sites have now been located within a safe walking distance of every child and family in the city. And the community's needs for community gardens, farmer's markets, libraries, community-based health centers and other social services have also been incorporated into a nexus strategy for all community development.

More than \$2.5 billion dollars in public school and other municipal funding has now been allocated to implement the school facilities and community nexus concept. Twenty-three schools are now in design or under construction. The City of New Orleans is working with the school district to re-allocate as much of its recovery funds as possible for co-located libraries, parks, social service centers and other community facilities. Combining recovery assets to develop community nexus centers could manifest a vision for the future of New Orleans that post-Katrina citizen-planners could until now only dream about. And with walking access to each of the community nexus sites, every citizen may some day have equitable access to a full range of community programs and services. With this reduced dependence on automobiles, the nexus plan will also deliver a more economical, environmentally sustainable and healthy community for everyone.

### Don't Wait for a Hurricane

Every community has programs, services and facilities that exist in different silos of organizational and physical space. Through a process called "asset based mapping", these components of the community nexus system can be identified and reallocated to more effectively serve the needs of all residents. But in order to access these benefits, those responsible for planning must learn to work together more collaboratively. New planning tools are now emerging to encourage and facilitate this process. The result could be a more efficient and cost effective means for delivering community services where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. ■

**Steven Binger** received his architectural training at the University of Virginia where he was free to indulge his curiosity of democratic principles. In 1983 he founded Concordia, a community-based planning and architecture firm, to pursue systemic and collaborative design practices. Concord - which means harmony among things and agreement between people - is the firm's one word mission statement. Design projects include the Contemporary Arts Center in New Orleans, where a cooperative partnership with seven sculptors explored visual art and architectural design as a collaborative enterprise; and the Henry Ford Academy in Dearborn, Michigan where Concordia worked with teams of teachers, students and arts curators to integrate a learning environment for 400 inner city high school students into the 80 acre Henry Ford Museum complex. In 2006, Concordia coordinated the development of the Unified New Orleans Plan, a comprehensive strategy for the redevelopment of the city of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. The process incorporated the work of 12 urban planning firms, 54 community planning district meetings and 3 citywide community congress events with a combined participation of more than 9,000 New Orleans citizens. Concordia's research alliances have included the MIT Media Lab, Harvard University's Project Zero, the University of New Mexico, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, the Thornburg Institute, the Appalachian Education Lab and the West Ed Research Lab.