

Conference highlights Fort Wayne's secret to success: its neighborhood associations

Editorial board | The Journal Gazette
Nov 21, 2024



Neighborhood pride is on the rise all across the city.

--	--	--	--	--	--	--

This week, Fort Wayne hosted the 2024 OKI Regional Planning Conference. “OKI” stands for Ohio, Kentucky and Indiana, and 300 to 350 community planners from all three states traveled to the Summit City to learn new ideas they can use to improve their neighborhoods, cities and towns.

Since the mid-1990s, when then-Mayor Paul Helmke elevated the importance of Fort Wayne's neighborhood associations, their members have been instrumental in identifying and planning many of the city's economic goals and quality-of-place improvements.

To ensure it continues initiating developments supported and welcomed by residents, the city's Community Development Division created the Neighborhood Planning and Activation Workgroup in January 2022. In May, Mayor Sharon Tucker and workgroup members announced nearly four dozen neighborhood projects to receive funding for initiatives that include new landscaping, playground equipment and bus-stop benches.

Jonathan Pacheco Bell is a senior planner at 4LEAF Inc. and lecturer in urban and regional planning at Cal Poly Pomona. Bell emphasizes street-level planning within a community, which he calls "embedded planning."

"Embedded planning is planning on the ground, planning at the street level," Bell told The Journal Gazette Wednesday, before delivering a keynote address during a lunchtime workshop at Draft Taproom & Coffee, 1833 N. Wells St. "Fort Wayne has taken the idea of embedded planning and fully implemented it here."

Embedded planning involves working directly from community spaces and places, engaging residents in their everyday environments. This approach helps planners gain a deeper understanding of local needs and aspirations, ensuring that community voices shape planning decisions.

By embedding themselves into neighborhoods, Bell said, planners build strong, authentic relationships with residents, moving beyond transactional consultations to create lasting and impactful partnerships.

"Urban planning, from its inception, has been a desk-bound practice. It has been one that, oftentimes, professionals from outside the neighborhoods are doing the work for neighborhoods they don't even go to and don't know," said Bell, who is also vice president/public information officer of the nonprofit Florence-Firestone Community Organization in South Central Los Angeles. "What's exciting is that Dan (Baisden, head of the Fort Wayne Department of Neighborhoods) and the team have fully implemented it with support from the city of Fort Wayne.

"It's the opposite of what I dealt with. I was dealing with deep resistance from management, and this city is saying, 'Go out and do embedded planning.' "

American participation in civic life is essential to sustaining governments at the national, state and local levels. Of increasing concern to many social and political scientists is the declining level of civic engagement across the country, a trend that started decades ago. This lack of engagement has reduced participation in community organizations and elections, especially among young people.

Fort Wayne is bucking that trend where community and economic development planning is involved. Neighborhood associations are the lifeblood of Fort Wayne and the secret to its quality of life. Decades of city leaders partnering with neighborhoods have built a strong foundation of funding community-driven projects.

Get involved in your neighborhood association; city officials want to hear from you.

letters@jg.net

Editorial Board