

MEMORANDUM
COMMUNITY & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

TO: City Manager

SUBJECT: Neighborhood News Wins Gold at NUSA Conference Date: June 13, 2012

At the Neighborhoods USA Conference held from May 23-26, 2012 in Indianapolis, the **City of Rock Island and Neighborhood Partners were awarded a "GOLD" certificate for "Excellence in Neighborhood Newsletters"** in the neighborhood newsletters competition. The Gold certificate will be presented to Rock Island City Council at the June 18 City Council meeting. This is the highest level of award offered by Neighborhoods USA. Entries were evaluated by a jury panel using a list of criteria including content, lay-out, consistency, relevance and overall appearance.

Neighborhood News beat out silver entries from Chandler, AZ; Commerce City, CO; Wichita, KS; Louisville, KY and Fort Wayne, TX. Other Gold winners were from the following communities: St. Petersburg, FL; Minneapolis, MN; Fort Wayne, TX and Shoreline, WA. Rock Island was the only municipality recognized as a Gold level winner; the others were from neighborhood or community associations.

Neighborhood News Credentials

Given that it has been some time since Rock Island City Council has received a report regarding *Neighborhood News*, the following details were excerpted mainly from the newsletter competition application for your information.

Neighborhood News, a quarterly newsletter publication printed under the auspices of Neighborhood Partners of Rock Island, with financial and staffing assistance from the City of Rock Island. Publication began in 1996, shortly after Neighborhood Partners was founded. The newsletter's substantial content, usually anywhere from 16 to 28 pages, is devoted to the activities of Rock Island's neighborhoods, Neighborhood Partners and its task forces, agencies serving neighborhoods and residents, current or emerging City polices that impact neighborhoods, and items that influence neighborhood quality of life and safety. One of the best features of this newsletter is the high number of articles submitted by neighborhood associations, the school district, agency staff and various City departmental staff, providing unique voices and perspectives, making it a true "community" newsletter.

Circulation: Printed and Online

In 1996, just 475 copies of the newsletter were printed. There has been a 357% increase in readership since that time. Today, 2,175 newsletters are printed and distributed each quarter.

Since the annual newsletter budget is not sufficient to blanket the community with *Neighborhood News*, distribution is employed in a strategic manner. The board members of 74 organizations form the core of the *Neighborhood News* mailing list, along with the 350 members of the Community Caring Conference block club network. The philosophy behind the focus on an organizational core to the mailing list is that people involved in civic life should be well-informed of neighborhood activities. These organizations include most City boards and commissions; neighborhood associations; ethnic community-based organizations; Rock Island business associations; Rock Island-based elected officials from city, county, townships and school districts; churches and synagogues; and other key community and quality-of-life organizations impacting neighborhoods. A complete list of these organizations can be made available upon request. Updated board lists are solicited from each of these organizations in the first quarter of every year.

Over the years, approximately 250 people have independently contacted the City to be placed on the newsletter mailing list. These individuals would have seen the newsletter through a public location where we distribute planned overruns or they would have been part of our "rotating" list of 500 to 600 current resident addresses sent to a new sector of the City each quarter. In this way we can hope to touch most households methodically without the prohibitive expense of a blanket run.

A secondary source for readership is through the on-line version of *Neighborhood News*. As each issue is completed, a PDF version is placed on the front page of the City of Rock Island website. This version of the

newsletter is identical to the printed version. Strangely, despite repeated attempts to convert print-readers to online readers, our subscribers have resisted. Many say they still wish to hold the hard copy in their hands.

Regardless, the online readership is surprisingly high. It is possible to infer that *Neighborhood News*, in current and archived forms, will receive 35,000 valid hits per year from the website. According to the City's Information Technology Division, the Summer 2011 *Neighborhood News* received 8,563 hits from July to September. In that same period, the next highest PDF download on the entire City website was actually the Winter 2011 *Neighborhood News*, with 1,420 hits in July and September. Other high-volume PDF downloads of any kind from the City website range in the 200s per month. From July to September 2011, five out of the top ten downloads from the City website were archived editions of the newsletter.

It should be noted Neighborhood Partners, through the City of Rock Island, also publishes a supplementary Neighborhood Partners eNews, which is delivered to 942 recipients on the first and third Thursdays of the month. This e-newsletter enjoys a 32% open rate and an 18% click-through rate, which is above the industry average. Visually and in terms of content it varies fairly dramatically from the printed newsletter. The e-newsletter has a much stronger focus on upcoming activities and events since a quarterly printed publication is somewhat limited in this manner. Conversely, the printed newsletter fully develops stories, including detailed information on community involvement and developing programs.

Cost

In FY2011-12, it is estimated the newsletter cost \$0.12 per online reader and \$0.65 per print reader. This estimate includes staff time, printing, bulk postage and postage services, with printing and postage removed from the estimate for the online readers. To further contain costs, the newsletter uses two-color rather than four-color print process. All costs associated with the newsletter are paid for through Community Development Block Grant funds allocated to Neighborhood Partners or staff and support services.

It should be noted the City has made a conscious choice to not solicit for advertising or subscriptions for this newsletter, which would place it in competition with the private newspaper industry and neighborhood-based newsletters. However, professional reporters cull stories from time to time, broadening even further the influence of this free newsletter. In addition, stories are shared liberally with the neighborhood-based newsletters, so many articles find a second life in these more focused publications.

Content

Any time an article is submitted from anyone other than Neighborhood Partners staff (Alan Carmen and Jill Doak), you will see a by-line for the story. The breadth of articles, and their sources, is one of the strengths of the newsletter. It truly reinforces community by including so many different organizations as sources. For example, 62% of the 78 articles in the Summer 2011 issue were written by someone other than Neighborhood Partners / City of Rock Island staff.

Upcoming events are a big focus. Plus, there are several regular sections in each issue: Next in the N'hoods, Learning Something New, Grants, High Praise, and On The Go.

Neighborhood Partners activities and city planning or public works elements affecting neighborhoods tend to be "developing" stories. Residents will read about activities or proposed policy changes in their early phases, allowing for citizen input during processes. It is not unusual for some activities to be more than a year in coverage, such as the New Old Chicago Neighborhood Plan, the College Hill District Revitalization Plan, Safe Routes to Schools plans, school restructuring (reducing 11 buildings to nine), solid waste refuse changes, leaf burning policies, redevelopment of the riverfront into Schwiebert Park, or the refugee/immigrant study circles resulting in the creation of Quad City Alliance for Immigrants & Refugees.

Submitted by: **Jill Doak, Urban Planner II**
Alan M. Carmen, Planning and Redevelopment Administrator
Jeff Eder, Community & Economic Development Director

APPROVED: **Thomas Thomas, City Manager**