



# Building Neighborhood Power:

Your Guide to Controlling  
Development in Your  
Community

## **Building Neighborhood Power:**

Your Guide to Controlling the Development Process in Your Community

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### I. Why Organize?

You've been living in your neighborhood for more than a decade but now it has started to change. New development is happening all around you: shops, luxury apartments, new restaurants, and bars. The stores that you went to where someone can speak your language, that you can afford, are closing. They're being replaced by new ones that cater to new residents who make more money than you do. The community is desperately in need of affordable housing. Your rent is going up, and you and your neighbors want to stay in the neighborhood. But instead of building more affordable housing, developers are building new condos or luxury apartments—at rents that you can't afford. You want the neighborhood you live in to continue to be affordable for people like you. But, what can you do?

#### You can organize!

Imagine conditions in your neighborhood have changed. You and other residents are able to decide what happens in your own backyard. Instead of development being shaped by those with wealth or power, community residents are the ones who determine what gets built in your neighborhood. The affordable housing, small businesses, and community spaces that you all have rallied together to save have been preserved. Elected officials visit you regularly to campaign for your vote. When a new development happens in your community, you have power in determining what happens in your neighborhood. When we come together as neighbors, we have the power to determine what happens in our communities.

*Are you ready to have a voice in what happens in your community?*

If so, keep reading! Learn how we can build power together in #OurNeighborhoods to collectively fight for community control over the development process.

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**It is more important  
to control  
development than it  
is to be a developer.  
-Gordon Chin,  
founding Executive  
Director of CCDC**

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## II. Planning a neighborhood organizing campaign

### What is a campaign?

A **campaign** is your plan to win lasting change for your community on an issue that you care about. Campaigns are part of our long term strategy to build power for our communities. We organize to win improvements in conditions for ourselves and our neighbors. We also organize to continue to build the base of our organization, its visibility, and momentum so that our community continues organizing in the long term.

Here are some ways to start an organizing campaign in your community:

### 1. Meet with Impacted Community Residents

Campaigns start with the right people. Community organizing campaigns center those who are most impacted by an issue. For example, if your campaign is around a “big box” store coming to your community, impacted communities could include working class residents who may be at risk of displacement if their rents increase, small businesses that are at risk of displacement when the store opens, or workers who work at those businesses who may lose their jobs if they close.



### 2. Identify a Problem Impacting Your Community

With impacted community members, you can discuss some of the challenges your community faces to decide on a collective problem you want to address.

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#### **Here are some examples of problems you may see in your neighborhood:**

- You're worried that a new big box store may be a threat to small businesses in the area.
- There's a new luxury housing complex being built in your neighborhood and you are worried the complex could lead to gentrification.
- There's a new transit line coming into your neighborhood and you are concerned that it may lead to increased development pressure and tenant displacement.
- The housing stock in your neighborhood is old and dilapidated, and you want to fight to improve code enforcement by the city.

### **3. Decide on Long and Short Term Solutions**

Once you've agreed on the problem, you want come up with solutions. Give people a chance to imagine how things could be different for your community.

- What do you actually want to see in your neighborhood? What do you want your community to look like 5, 10, even 20 years from now?

When you have a shared long term vision for your community, work towards having a short term goal that you would like to achieve that gets you closer to that vision.

An example of a long term goal could be, "We want to end gentrification in our city." An example of a short term goal could be, "Pass renters rights legislation to prevent the evictions of tenants at risk of displacement."

#### **What if there's more than one issue we're concerned about?**

An organizing campaign requires significant time and resources. Here are some criteria you can use when deciding between issues:

- Is it strategic?
- Does it impact our base widely?
- Does it impact our base deeply?
- Will it build the visibility of your organization?
- Is it winnable?
- What is the timeline?
- Do we have the staff/other resource capacity to take on this campaign?
- Will it strengthen your coalition? (Will it bring people together or is it divisive?)



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#### 4. Create a Set of Demands for Your Campaign

Once you've identified an issue to rally around, create a list of your specific demands. *Demands are concrete, specific asks that you want to make of a decision maker.* For example, if you want to influence ongoing development in your neighborhood:

- Is your goal to stop the development all together?
- Is your goal to influence the development so that it is more beneficial for your local community?
- Is there something else the community wants built there instead?

#### **Your demands can be visionary.**

Center your demands around what your community wants—not just what you think you can win easily. There are plenty of examples where communities have won victories through organizing that policy makers or other “experts” thought were “impossible.” Just because it hasn't been done before doesn't mean your community can't be the first!

#### **Make sure your community is united on the vision and how you want to work together.**

Remember - If a developer senses that people in the community disagree, it is a weakness that they can exploit to “divide and conquer.”

### III. Developing a campaign strategy

#### What is a strategy?

A **strategy** is a thought out plan of actions that will help you reach victory. No matter the issue, every campaign has a strategy.

Here are steps you can take to develop a strategy for your campaign:

#### 1. Identify your target

Organizing campaigns usually have a “target” - the person with the power to give you what you want. In this case, it will usually be someone in city government who has the power to approve the development, or has other authority over local land



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use policy. It could be an appointed official, such as the head of a City Planning department. It could be an elected official, such as the Mayor or a City Council member. Or it could be a board of appointed officials, such as a planning review board.

- In many cases, a combination of these three players will be involved and depending on the process in your city, they may be involved at different levels.
- Identify one person that you are trying to influence who can meet your specific demands.

**The more you know about the people you're trying to influence, the easier it will be to strategize how to influence them.**

## **2. Research your target**

**Once you've identified a target, you want to better understand their self interest:**

- Who are they?
- What are their motivations?
- Do they receive any donations? (Particularly from the developer or other corporate/ development interests?)
- What's their position on development issues? Affordable housing? Gentrification?
- Do they have any pet projects? Particular legislation they're trying to get passed or issues they've been involved in locally?
- What connections do they have to the local community? Do they attend a local mosque or church? Do their kids go to schools in the neighborhood? Do they live in the neighborhood?

## **3. Understand your Opposition**

Researching your opposition is fundamental. While the opposition is usually a developer, it can also be the real estate lobby, or even residents who may take an opposing view to you.

**Things to research about developers**

- Who is the developer?
- Do they have any other planned developments in the city or neighborhood? (If they have multiple developments, one way you can gain more leverage is to

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partner with residents who are organizing around one of their other developments)

- What are their interests? Are they on the local planning council?
- Do they donate to any political candidates or officials in your neighborhood?
- Are they locally based or based in another city, state, or country?
- For more information on corporate and opposition research, you can visit the Data Center campaign research guide.

## IV. Understanding your city's development and planning process

Most cities have some form of approval process for new developments. Understanding and using the development approval process to your advantage is the key to stopping or influencing a development proposal. Know when your actions have the most leverage and target your influence appropriately.

Check out the following background documents to help you understand your local development approval processes:

- "What is Zoning?"
- "Understanding the Development Process"

Zoning and land use processes vary greatly from place to place. There are many concepts, which are cross-cutting but it is important that you try to understand the specifics of how the rules are applied in your own city!

We mobilized residents around a review process in New York City. The process is very bureaucratic and unfair. And it's inaccessible to residents - for example, a lot of meetings would be held at... 10 am in the financial district. This meant that community members from Queens, where the fight was, weren't able to attend... So it was not an accessible process. And that's something we blew up as well. Blaming the process, not just the development... Even if people weren't super angry about the development they thought, 'Why can't I actually attend these meetings?' 'Why don't I know what is going on?'

- Shrima Pandey, Queens Neighborhood United

### Doing Research about A Development You're Trying to Influence:



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#### **Where can I go for more information about a proposed development?**

Most cities, with the exception of the city of Houston, have a local planning commission, which oversees any new development projects in your community. The Planning commissioner is usually an appointed official, selected by the Mayor or City Council. You can go to the Planning department to get more information about a proposed development project, including its timeline, and whether there are any proposed changes to zoning as part of the process.

The staff at your Planning department can be a helpful resource for understanding how your local planning review process works. More importantly, the details of these projects are public information. The staff in your local Planning department should tell you more about the project, its proposed timeline, whether there is opportunity for public comment, and who approves the development.

#### **Who owns the land?**

- If it's government owned, you'll have more leverage over what can be built.
- If you're organizing around a site that is owned by a private developer, you'll have less leverage but can still influence them, especially if the process is proposing any changes to the zoning.

#### **What is the timeline for the development?**

- Having a better understanding of the timeline and process that the planned development will go through will help you find natural places where you can exert your influence over the process. Most proposed developments will have opportunities for review or public comment.
- Often, community members aren't informed about development projects until after construction has started, or until a new development is announced publicly (after it's been approved by the city). This is why being proactive in your organizing approach is critical. Once you've waged one "site fight" you'll be ready to look at multiple development sites in your neighborhood to see if there are others earlier on in the process.

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#### **What can be built legally on the site? Would the development require any changes to zoning?**

- When you're looking into the site in question, you'll want to know if the planned development is already permitted within the existing zoning requirements. This is called "by right" development.
- Alternately, it may require an exception to the local zoning, called a "variance." If they're asking for a variance, or a zoning change you will have some opportunity to influence their development through some type of public comment or community input process.
- If the development is permitted by right, there will be less opportunity to weigh in through traditional advocacy methods, and you may need to resort to different kinds of organizing tactics, such as direct action, civil disobedience, or exerting public pressure through media.

#### **Is there a land use review process that the city, or local planning department requires?**

- If there is a land use review process, you'll want to see if you can get to know more about how the process works, any upcoming deadlines, or hearings where you'll be able to testify to submit comments about the project.

#### **Who decides what gets built on the site?**

- This will depend on your city. It's possible that there may be a planning review board that oversees any changes to zoning for new development projects. These review boards often comprise people who hold development interests, such as real estate companies or campaign contributors. A long term political strategy, if your community wants to be more involved in the development process, could be trying to influence who gets appointed/elected to a local planning review board.
- Before you start to organize, you'll need to know a little bit about local zoning laws in your city. Zoning laws govern what can be built in a city, and regulate things like the type of building that can be built (called "land use"), the size of buildings, how far a unit has to be set back from the sidewalk, parking requirements, requirements around signage, or protections for historic sites.

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## V. Taking action to win your campaign

Now that you have a good idea about the process, and what you're up against, you can start to take action. Your main goal, whether you're trying to stop a planned development, or influence a planned development, is to slow down the development process. This will give you the leverage to negotiate with the developers.



### Using the land use review process as part of your campaign

Use the land use review process to your advantage. This is the main “legal” mechanism you often have to make your voice heard. It’s important to have a consistent volume of organized opposition to the development present to tell stories of how it will impact them. Most of the time, hearings will be held at times where community members aren’t able to attend. It’s also possible that they will be held outside of the neighborhood or community. If this is the case, organize what resistance you can. You can also use the fact that there was no meaningful community engagement as part of your narrative about the development. Even among people who may not have been opposed to the development, there may be anger at the fact that they weren’t able to attend meetings, or that their voice wasn’t heard in the process.

### Slow down the development process

Small changes to the development or development timeline will greatly impact the developers’ ability to make money. Use the community engagement narrative as a way to slow the process down.

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T]he developer wants to move the process along. And our goal is always to slow it down. We would be at the planning commission meetings and we asked for an extension so we have time to negotiate. And the developer was like, we're far enough and ready to get approved now. Public comment from the youth would be an opportunity for members in the community to advocate for longer time for negotiation... The way that the youth talk about gentrification and how it impacts their neighborhood in response to what is happening is really moving. And it's totally something that a lot of times only youth are able to share in this way because they're so much clearer about the conditions that are happening. Whereas adults sometimes say, the policy says this and it should be like this.' [Youth are] just very clear that it's not cool for the community and here's why.

- Joshua Fisher Lee, AYPAL

### Here are some tactics that can influence or slow down the development process:

- *Is the development part of an environmental review process? Or are there any environmental impacts that the proposed development could have that haven't been considered?*
  - Almost every city has some form of environmental review process. You can use an environmental issue as a way to slow down the development process. You can look at an environmental impact analysis to see if anything is missing that strengthens your argument.
  - In addition to looking into the city's planning commission, you can try to involve the national environmental review board or a state environmental review agency in the project.
- *Is the development part of a historic district?*
  - If the development is taking place in a historic district or a historic area, check to see if there are any requirements that the development is violating.
- *Does the development receive any public funding such as tax breaks?*
  - If the developers are relying on a public source of funding for the project, that can be an additional point of leverage. They will have to make the case that the public will benefit from the project in some way. This is an

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argument that you use with the City, if you believe that the project won't benefit the local community.

#### **Here are some examples of actions that you can take with your community:**

- Collect petitions (online or in person)
- Hold a community town hall on the issue
- Mobilize impacted residents to tell their stories at public hearings
- Use influence of print, online, or ethnic media to build a narrative of support around your campaign
- Plan a march or rally in your community
- Involve local media by hosting a press conference, issuing a press release, or writing Op Eds or Letters to the Editor
- Organize a “direct action”-- for example, a tent city, sit-in, or other form of civil disobedience in opposition to the planned development

#### **Escalate actions over time**

A good rule when organizing is to “escalate” actions over time. Meaning that the strategies that you use to try to influence your target can increase in intensity over time. Chances are you'll want to start off the campaign using a more traditional advocacy strategy like having meetings with decision makers, or public testimony. Over time, if they are unwilling to meet your demands, you can “escalate” to having more intense actions like public demonstrations, marches, rallies, or civil disobedience actions. The size and scale of these actions depends on your organizational capacity and how much work you're willing to put into the organizing process.

#### **Sustain long term organizing**

It's not over with just one “site fight.” There will likely be more site fights in your future. You should have a plan for long term engagement and retain relationships to keep your supporters and allies engaged in the work long term.

#### **Plan Ahead**

To avoid the community being too late in the process to have influence, get ahead of the game. Research the planned developments in your community as early as possible. If



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you notice a specific developer building up a lot of sites in your neighborhood, you can zoom in on that developer and organize around more than one of their sites.

### Build a consistent narrative about your campaign

- Meet regularly with local media and invite them to community events
- Help them to feel like they can rely on your organization for accurate information about the development as it takes place
- Personal stories and narratives will make a bigger case for your issue - over policy or data. Have storytellers from your community be the voice of your campaign. The more moving the narrative you tell about the campaign is, the more likely your victory.

It has been amazing to see leadership development in the tenants. They go from being fearful of taking action to being the first ones to stand up during the call for comments from the audience against a mega-developer. They know what to say. In a giant room of [white] people, it's amazing to see their fearlessness. They have learned the power of speaking up and coming together. They're not afraid. So even if there are big developers, big guys in suits, they show up and they speak up. It's been really amazing to see them go from taking action for small building to seeing their role in the larger movement against gentrification in Chinatown.

- Charlotte Nguyen, CCED

### Educate the Community

“Demystify” the development process. A lot of times, misinformation is spread to the community about what will be built or what the process will look like. Your job, as an organizer, is to make sure that the community has consistent and accurate information about the development process over time.

Another way to build public support for your campaign is through appealing to the value of transparency (and demonstrating the ways the opposition is often not transparent or fair in



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their engagement with the community).

#### **Engage elected officials**

- Decision makers matter. It's possible that at the moment you have an "unfriendly" council member, community board, or planning commission body. But over time, as your organization builds its base of organized support, your decision makers will have to change their stance on development.
- Make sure you have integrated voter engagement as part of your long term strategy for building political power to hold your elected officials accountable.

## **VI. When to Compromise: Community Benefits Agreements**

In some cases you won't be able to stop a development from going forward but you will be able to get some concessions for your community. Many groups do this through something called a "Community Benefits Agreement (CBA)." This is a legally binding contract that requires a developer or corporation to contribute positively to the community when a development takes place.

Never compromise with a developer without some form of binding legal agreement that assures you that the developer will deliver the agreed upon benefits.

#### **What types of benefits are part of CBAs?**

##### **Examples of asks you can make include:**

- Requiring additional affordable housing units to be built on the site
- Requiring more deeply affordable housing to be built on the site
- Requiring a community amenity, such as green space or a community center
- Requiring local hiring
- Payment of living wages to employees
- Environmental benefits
- Parks or open space

Your CBA should include specific, measurable deliverables (e.g., specific numbers of affordable housing units at what levels of affordability; specific jobs at what wage levels

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to be provided to local residents; etc.), with the terms clearly defined, with clear timelines, and remedies if the goals are not met.

For more information on how to negotiate a community benefits agreement, check out the Partnership for Working Families' Community Benefits toolkit.

## **VII. Getting ahead of gentrification: Neighborhood Planning**

After some time spent fighting buildings one at a time, we can move towards a more long term strategy of neighborhood preservation. Rather than waiting for buildings or development to be built, we can work towards having a say proactively in the development process. This is called “neighborhood planning.”

### **Why work on a neighborhood plan?**

- Planning gives people in your community a say in what is developed. People are able to contribute actively to what their community looks like and what is built in the future.
- Through a planning process, community members can come together to decide what they want their neighborhood to look like.
- Instead of fighting back against development projects one by one, you're able to set a vision for what you want your community to look like 5, 10, 20, or even 50 years from now!
- Traditionally, local planning processes were dominated by academics with professional degrees, for profit developers, or politicians with political power. These forces are often profit-motivated, and don't reflect the needs of people who will be most impacted by new development: community residents themselves.

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**What steps should I take if I want to work on a neighborhood plan:**

#### 1. Form a shared vision of your neighborhood

- What are the emerging issues in your neighborhood?
- What would you like to see built in the future?
- Who are the different populations living in your community?
- Are the needs of your community being met by what's currently being developed? What's missing?

#### 2. Collect data about the community's needs

- What populations live in your community?
- Are their needs being met?
- What emerging needs does your community have that should be met by this plan?

#### 3. Create a plan

Once you have a vision for what you'd like to see in your community, you can write the actual plan. You should consult a land use attorney or an urban planner who can provide you with technical expertise as you create your neighborhood plan. As neighborhood residents or advocates, you will also want to have a sense of how zoning laws work locally as well.

#### **Creating a Neighborhood Plan**

***What does the zoning look like in your community?***

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- You can look at existing zoning in the neighborhood to see what the current “land use” map looks like. On a land use map, you’ll be able to see what the current land is “zoned” for.
- Land is divided into “parcels” which are pieces of land that can be developed on.
- *Does it match what is currently built there or is it different?*

#### ***Does your community want to be more developed?***

- By increasing the floor area ratio (FAR) or height limit for development in your community, you can incentivize building in places where your community hasn’t been developed. This can be a good strategy if you feel like your neighborhood has been “disinvested” in and you want to promote development coming in to your community.

#### ***Or does your community want to restrict development?***

- If you are concerned about gentrification in your neighborhood, you may want to restrict the development taking place in your neighborhood by “downzoning” or limiting the amount of FAR or creating height limits for the existing developments.

#### ***What uses would you like to have in your community?***

- Regulating land use is a way to promote the kinds of development you’d like to see in your community and restrict other forms of development.
- If your neighborhood includes zones for manufacturing and industry, the city may be planning to “rezone” it to accommodate new residential or commercial development. Depending on your community’s needs, this could be a good or bad thing.
- For example, if your community relies on manufacturing jobs that exist because an area is currently zoned for manufacturing use, you may want to preserve those jobs. On the other hand, if land isn’t being used properly, you may want to encourage more housing there.

#### ***Special Zoning Districts***



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- Special Zoning Districts are a mechanism by which you can make exceptions to existing zoning law or create new protections to protect a unique area in the community.
- Special districts are useful because they can allow you to create new land use or other zoning protections for your community that might not otherwise be accessible.
- In the U.S. there are plenty of examples where Asian and other ethnic enclaves have been able to win a special zoning district to preserve the cultural heritage of a community. How successful these districts are in preventing displacement varies greatly from place to place and really depend on the specific provisions in a plan.

#### **4. Advocate for the city to adopt the plan**

Different cities have different processes on how community-specific plans can be proposed and adopted. Research what your city process is. Does it have to go through the Planning Department? Does your City Councilmember have to sign off? Who are your allies in this process? What are your leverage points?

#### **5. Implement the plan**

Generally it is the responsibility of the City to implement the plan. But when a new plan that you helped shape is adopted, you will likely want to help publicize and inform community stakeholders of any changes.

#### **6. Monitor and enforce the plan**

The best plans mean nothing if they have no teeth or no one to watch to make sure that they are followed. You will still have to track what development is happening in your neighborhood. Depending upon the process and enforcement mechanisms, you may have to bring issues to the attention of your local government.