

Navigating the Political Landscape...

New Community Corporation helps residents of inner cities improve the quality of their lives to reflect individual God-given dignity and personal achievement. As it works toward this mission, New Community considers direct political organizing and activism as critical to its progress. New Community focuses on five key issues affecting the opportunities of inner city residents: education, employment, health care, housing, and safety. In order to influence these factors, NCC works with residents to identify issues of concern, develop a political agenda, and actively engage in the political process. This primer includes examples of how New Community has used politics and political organizing to improve the opportunities available to Newark residents and what they have learned in the process.

Why does New Community emphasize political activism?

While New Community provides direct services and opportunities in its five priority areas—education, employment, health care, housing, and safety—it recognizes that political structures beyond the neighborhood level create the landscape within which it works and influences the organization’s ability to accomplish its goals. Rather than resigning itself to political realities that are inhospitable to neighborhood improvement, New Community innovatively navigates and influences its political landscape.

What is the political landscape?

The political landscape includes a network of players—government figures, business leaders, and other non-profit people—who combine to create the opportunities for and impediments to success for inner-city residents. Figure 1 illustrates the interconnectedness of participants in the political landscape. No one part can be isolated from the others. New Community believes that the most productive route to improving the quality of life of inner-city residents is one encompassing all parts of the political landscape.

NCC organizes and prepares its employees, program participants, and Central and West Ward residents to establish relationships with, seek support from, and challenge political structures on all levels. Through community organizing, NCC helps residents build political power.

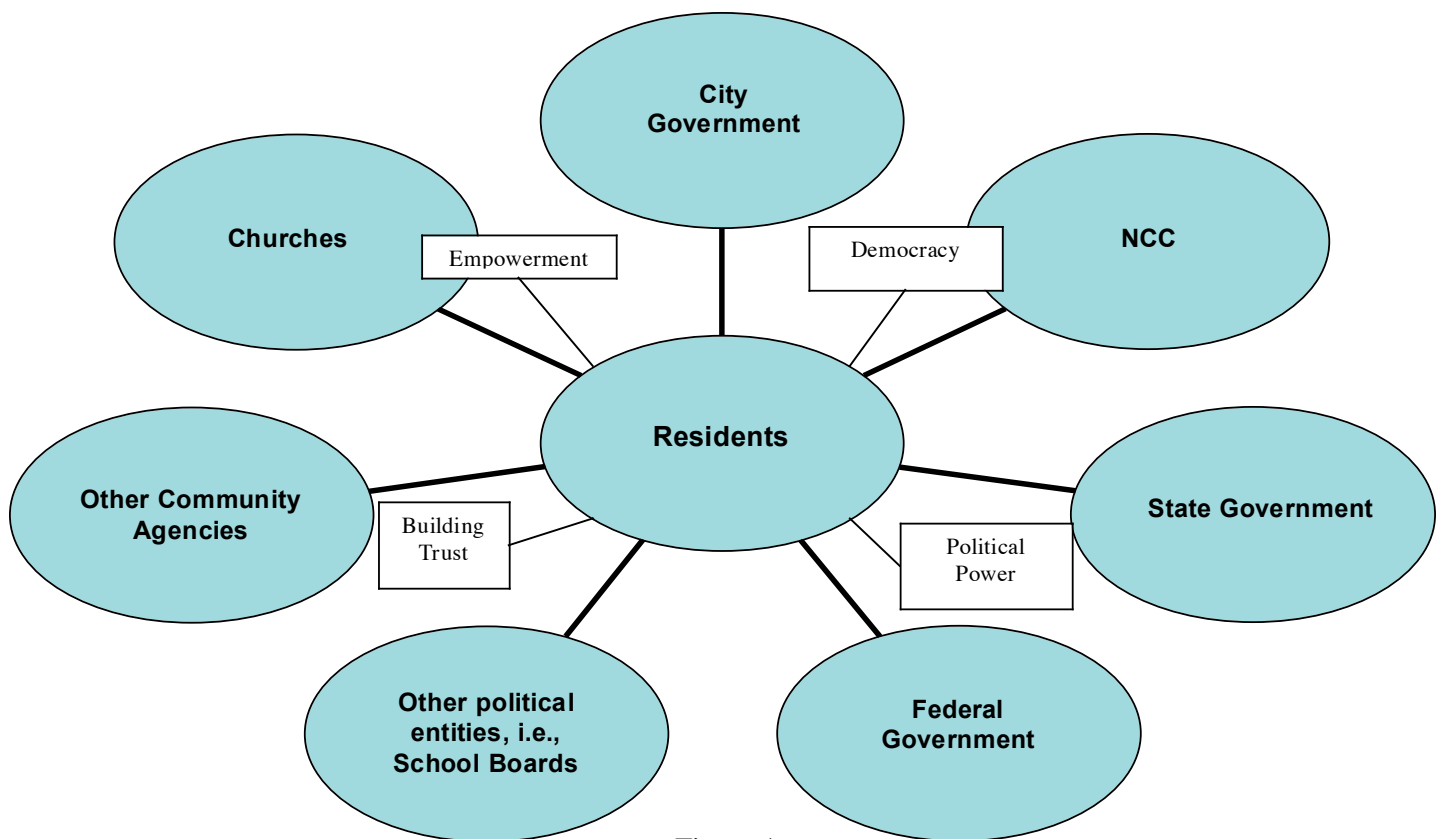


Figure 1

NCC *navigates its political landscape* by continuously reviewing and reassessing local concerns and devising new strategies to turn obstacles into opportunities. New Community *influences the political landscape* by encouraging both staff and local residents to participate in the political process. This includes involvement in elections on all levels, coalition building, and taking an active stance on issues that affect the community.

How does New Community navigate its political landscape?

New Community recognizes its political position. The organization knows all of the major neighborhood, city, and state players, and keeps abreast of political issues affecting its constituents. It understands the policies affecting its work and knows which other groups are

working on related projects and who is working in opposition.

For example, New Community has had a contentious relationship with Newark's city government. Although cooperation is the first and most important step when it comes to working with other agencies, NCC does not hesitate to confront, oppose, and challenge those agencies and organizations that are not acting in residents' best interest. Rather than altering its goals to fit the city's mission, New Community takes an aggressive political approach to gain city cooperation and, when possible, maneuvers around the city to find alternate funding sources and political support. In navigating its political landscape, NCC begins with its mission, becomes familiar with all of the various players involved, and finds creative paths to success.

Navigating the Political Landscape

Start with a mission



Know the context



Be creative

How does New Community influence its political landscape?

Tenant Organizing

New Community *builds resident empowerment through tenant organizing*. Tenant associations are small-scale democracies that teach the political process and build a base of support and legitimacy for New Community. Tenants elect leaders, set agendas, and run monthly meetings at New Community residences to discuss building concerns. Tenant associations spawn ideas that substantively influence programs and policies at New Community. Resident leaders undergo training that includes quarterly meetings with New Community staff to work on personal leadership and organizational skills and discuss building-specific issues. New Community emphasizes that “all organizing is reorganizing,” meaning that a structure or process appropriate at one time or place will not necessarily transfer to next month or to another building or set of residents. This adds up to a personal and flexible approach to political organizing.

Residents learn that by acting politically they can improve their lives. New Community teaches

democracy by showing how to make progress within the organization’s structure. It hopes that these lessons will build confidence and skills that will encourage greater change later—change that could affect the politics of the city and state and, by extension, people’s lives. In addition, NCC staff focuses on building trusting relationships with residents because they see the need for support when taking on neighborhood, citywide, and national political battles. Positive relationships between New Community staff and residents create a powerful alliance. Community members are the backbone and legitimacy of any New Community action.

NCC fosters positive relationships by including tenants in organizational events and providing more services. There is an effort to appreciate and care for people on an individual level while working for community change. The organization employs community liaisons who are friends and neighbors of community members, not just educators or service providers.

Turning Obstacles into Opportunities

When navigating its political landscape, New Community finds creative ways to turn obstacles into opportunities. NCC’s decision to look beyond the city government to help finance its health care building provides an example of the organization’s determination and innovation. Although New Community owned the land it planned to use for its health care facility, the organization sought additional revenue from the federal government to leverage the cost of development. New Community took their project directly to the U.S. Economic Development Agency (EDA) only to find out that it needed local approval to be eligible for EDA funding. The city administration rejected NCC’s request on the grounds that it already had twenty projects on its list for funding. The City would not include NCC until those twenty projects received funding. An in-depth analysis of funding guidelines revealed that both the city *and* county could submit lists including their top projects to be considered for federal funding. New Community collaborated with Essex County to create a new list with NCC’s projects listed as numbers one and two, making the health care facility eligible for federal funding. After receiving \$1.6 million in grant money NCC had enough equity (\$1.8 million) to get a \$3.9 million loan for construction and a \$4.4 million loan to cover long-term financing.

Local Residents Influence the Political Process

Before NCC built a Pathmark supermarket in the Central Ward, it faced a number of obstacles. First, there was conflict with the city over zoning approvals and tax abatements. At one point, NCC took the city to court to force the condemnation of some of the land. New Community felt these measures were necessary because the community unquestionably needed a supermarket evidenced by the more than 12,000 residents who signed a petition to bring a high-quality food supermarket to the community to provide for the shopping needs of Central Ward families. NCC and local residents placed tremendous pressure on the local government by bringing residents “by the busload” to pack council and zoning board meetings and explain the dire need for a supermarket. Residents explained that without a local supermarket, they had to take long and expensive bus rides to get items most take for granted. Although the lenders for the project had placed strict time restraints for project completion and the Planning Board was still waffling on the project NCC and local residents stayed the course. On the night the deal was supposed to go before the Planning Board, New Community brought more than 500 people to the meeting, and the project was moved from number seven on the evening’s agenda to number one. Due in large part to NCC’s assertive politics and strong resident participation, the project passed unanimously (Guskind & Pierce 1993, 45).

This makes it easier for them to reach out and foster political relationships. There is a strong effort to avoid hierarchical relationships, or service provider-recipient attitudes, in one-on-one settings. As a result, tenant associations accomplish a number of interconnected goals. They teach democracy, empower residents, and build grassroots support for New Community.

Internal Organizing

New Community succeeds in efforts to organize and prepare residents for the political process because it seeks out individuals with political affiliations, and trains its staff to establish political connections and to seek leadership positions on local boards of major organizations. This emphasis on building political networks is a strong part of New Community’s history that continues today.

As New Community received recognition from politicians and other key political figures, New Community’s ability to play an active role in local politics has increased. Over the years, Monsignor

Linder has served on several boards including the State and Employment Training Commission (SETC) and the Housing and Mortgage Financing Agency (HMFA). Board membership is not unique to Monsignor Linder. Richard Cammarieri, Special Projects Director for NCC, is an elected member of the Newark School Board. Board membership and political connections are important because they provide New Community staff with first-hand insights into

major issues that have an effect on the community. This gives New Community staff a chance to learn more about an issue and identify influential players and politicians with whom they have connections to assist the organization in advocating either for or against a particular issue. New Community’s ties to political officials and seats on influential boards did not appear overnight. Monsignor Linder and New Community staff have worked extensively to identify, recruit, and establish relationships with politicians and key political figures in and outside of Newark.

New Community staff constantly engage in workshops and discussions to remain abreast of on-going issues. These issues include school board elections, city council and mayoral elections, and pending legislation at all government levels that affect Newark residents’ opportunities in education, employment, health care, housing, and safety. In addition, staffers make it their business to know specialists and directors of organizations that are dealing with the relevant issues and to connect residents to these individuals when appropriate.

Issue Advocacy

New Community believes that political activism is an essential part of working for the betterment of Newark. NCC researches the important questions, brings information to the community, and provides a strong voice in political forums. In these ways, New Community acts as an informational intermediary, issue advocate, and strong supporter of resident activism.

Coalition Building

New Community *views coalitions as professional alliances formed around issues*. The organization remains open to partners regardless of past stances and partisan politics because it realizes that winning political battles requires diverse, and sometimes unexpected, partnerships. New Community's partners are suburban and urban, Democrats and Republicans, governmental and nongovernmental.

Tapping Self-Interest

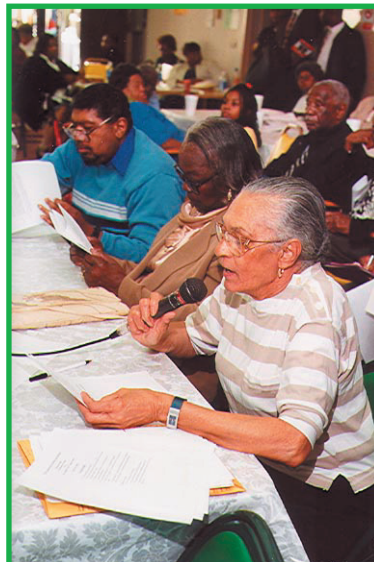
New Community believes strongly in community vision, but recognizes that most people—whether they are residents, government officials, or other players in the political process – make decisions and engage in actions based on self-interest. En route to establishing communal vision and promoting actions of benefit to the community at large, NCC begins at the level of the individual.

For example, many Newark residents struggle to make ends meet. A single mother of three working two part-time jobs and living in subsidized housing spends her off-work hours scrambling to get food on the table, bills in the mail, and her kids to school on time. Her sink has been leaking for three weeks. Imagine a community activist knocking on her door and suggesting she attend a city council meeting on Thursday evening to protest a waste transfer station slated for the vacant lot down the street. Her kids are in the kitchen waiting for dinner and she has come up short on her utility bill this month because she has had to stay home with her youngest who has had a fever and cannot go to daycare.

Issues as abstract and distant as a waste transfer station or a downtown arena are the least of her worries. The Thursday night meeting seems irrelevant and the community activist insensitive. She really needs someone to fix her sink and a full time job that provides good wages and benefits. New Community respects her priorities. You will not find a New Community staffer knocking on doors to solicit volunteers without first working to respond to immediate needs. In New Community buildings, the first step would be to fix the sink, the second to alert the single mother of NCC's paid job training opportunities. Once trust has been established and immediate needs are addressed, New Community will work with the mother to identify larger issues affecting her immediate circumstances. A waste transfer station would repel the establishment of other businesses she would like in her neighborhood, like a grocery store and an affordable daycare center. It would jeopardize neighborhood safety for her children and the children of her neighbors, who, she now sees, are facing many of the same trials she faces. By first understanding, respecting, and responding to the circumstances of their constituents, New Community illuminates communal needs and enlists residents in collective action.

Many residents of low-income inner city communities are justifiably angry about their circumstances. Political apathy is prevalent. New Community works

to turn anger into action rather than apathy by illustrating the connections between daily life and larger political decisions. NCC provides reasons for hope and opportunity for residents to use their anger as a tool for change. The goal is to raise awareness of the connections between larger political happenings and local circumstances and to use that awareness to



launch collective action.

Beginning with self-interest is not a strategy limited to residents. New Community emphasizes self-interest at the forefront of many, if not most, of its partnerships. Starting with the self-interest of potential partners allows New Community to gain from relationships and alliances with a much broader spectrum of players and produces longer lasting partnerships than it would with beginning with mutual visions. By being responsive to the self-interest of residents, government officials, and players in the political landscape, NCC enlists them in collective action to improve the quality of life of residents.

New Community influences its political landscape by organizing internally and positioning its staff on influential boards, organizing tenants, researching and advocating issues, building broad issue-based coalitions, and by tapping self-interest in the service of collective vision.

Building Coalitions

Before the 2003 Newark School Board election, there was an effort to unseat the local school superintendent. New Community believed that if elected, the candidate would not serve in the best interest of Newark students and therefore joined a coalition with other community organizations called the For Our Kids Team to support the incumbent Superintendent. The For Our Kids Team featured several other local CDCs and the Teachers Union, many members of which had previously opposed New Community's charter school ventures. New Community and the Teachers Union, along with other members of For Our Kids Team, put their differences aside. For Our Kids united to influence an election they believed represented a maneuver to oust a Superintendent in good standing to gain more direct power over city schools. An unprecedented fifteen thousand people turned out for the election to win an overwhelming 3 to 1 victory for candidates supporting the incumbent.

Influencing the Political Landscape

Organizing internally



Organizing tenants



Advocating issues



Building coalitions



Tapping self-interest

Top Lessons

The experience of New Community Corporation provides valuable lessons for other community organizations working to improve opportunities in inner city communities. New Community identifies the following lessons as key to their success:

- **ESTABLISH A STRATEGIC MISSION.**
- **KNOW THE POLITICAL CONTEXT.**
- **NEVER JEOPARDIZE THE MISSION FOR FUNDING PURPOSES.**
- **TURN OBSTACLES INTO OPPORTUNITIES.**
- **FOSTER RESIDENT LEADERSHIP.**
- **ADDRESS IMMEDIATE NEEDS FIRST.**
- **ORGANIZE AROUND ISSUES.**
- **DIVERSIFY SUPPORT, BOTH FINANCIAL AND POLITICAL.**
- **EVOLVE WITH THE COMMUNITY YOU SERVE.** The needs of the community will not always be the same, the more in touch you are with the community the better you will be able to sense a change



Resources

All information except where noted within was gathered from interviews with the following New Community staff:

Richard Cammarieri, *Resident Organizer*
Ray Codey, *Development Director*
Gloria Chambers, *Social Services Director*
Sister Eileen, *Resident Organizer*
Madge Wilson, *Community Liaison*

Bibliography

Guskind, Robert and Neal Pierce. 1993. *Against the Tide: The New Community Corporation, 1968-1993*. Newark: NCC.

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