

FEATURE STORIES

‘Doing the work quietly’

North Portland Community Works spreads the money around

By Todd Anthony



North Portland Community Works is midwife to many a local project, including the North Portland Tool Library founded by these young lads. PHOTO BY MATT WOOD SEYMOUR JOURNALIST

Stationed at the Historic Kenton Firehouse on North Schofield, North Portland Community Works (NPCW) is a nonprofit corporation that helps non-incorporated entities obtain funding and support for various community projects. From small-scale fiscal sponsorship of projects such as the installation of speed bumps on Willamette Boulevard to the long-term Harbor Oil Superfund site cleanup, NPCW is spreading its wings.

Instituted in 1996, the organization was originally named the Kenton Action Plan and solely served the Kenton neighborhood, working on community building issues, economic development and crime prevention. Over the years they expanded their scope and boundaries, eventually becoming fiscal sponsors for projects in St. Johns, Overlook, East Columbia and Bridgeton.

In 2005, the group decided to rework their mission and changed their name to North Portland Community Works. Now the service area includes all of North Portland, St. Johns and even some neighborhoods in Northeast.

North Portland Community Works has a 501(c)(3) federal tax exempt status. “The highest federal tax status you can get,” explains the current presiding executive director, Tom Griffin-Valade, who has been with the group since its inception. “The idea is to incubate groups and projects, giving them the technical advice and fiscal assistance they need to get up and running. We hope that some day they get the same tax status and will be free and strong enough to operate on their own.”

Loosely linked to North Portland Neighborhood Services, of which Griffin-Valade is also the director, NPCW is its own umbrella entity. Many of the projects it oversees are proposed by its eight-member volunteer board.

Before joining the group as chair last year, Jason Hatch founded the North Portland Tool Library, borrowing the idea from the University of California-Berkeley. NPCW facilitated two grants for the library, a Fred Meyer Memorial Trust grant (\$12,000) and a Community Development Block grant (\$12,000) from the City of Portland Bureau of Housing and Community Development.

Hatch refers to NPCW as a “launching pad.” “If you’re a project that’s starting up and you don’t have a lot of infrastructure or you have an idea that you’re not sure will fly, North Portland Community Works can help.”

Harbor Oil Community Advisory Group (HOCAG) member Mark Stephan joined the group less than a year ago in order to apply for a \$50,000 technical assistance grant from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The EPA awarded the grant to HOCAG in June.

The money from the EPA grant will pay for a technical advisor who will assess and recommend a proper cleanup procedure for the 4.2-acre Harbor Oil site located near the Expo Center. The grounds were designated as a Superfund site by the EPA in 2003.

“North Portland Community Works is a great way of tying the community together,” said Stephan. “As [NPCW] grows I think it has a lot of potential to be a real presence in North Portland.”

Another large-scale undertaking that NPCW is facilitating is the Columbia Children’s Arboretum park improvement project. Dick Towle and Gyrid Hyde-Towle of the East Columbia Neighborhood Association have been working to improve the arboretum, where the annual East

Columbia Multicultural Picnic (happening on July 28 this year) is held, since 2002 when neighborhood residents declared the blackberry-laden park to be a jewel in the rough in need of rescue.

With the help of North Portland Community Works, the Nature in the Neighborhoods grant (\$36,380) was awarded to the East Columbia Neighborhood Association by Metro last May.

“Tom [Griffin-Valade’s] communication skills are above and beyond. If we need help in some area he makes sure we find the right people to get the help from no matter what. He is a jack of all trades when it comes to communication. That is his forte,” said Hyde-Towle.

Money from the Nature in the Neighborhoods grant will go to various park improvements such as additional signage, the removal of a non-functioning culvert and the installation of a footbridge.

Marching along without publicity or even a website, North Portland Community Works continues to grow. Open to hearing community project proposals from anyone with an idea, Tom Griffin-Valade asserts, “We [NPCW] are not trying to sell ourselves. We are doing the work quietly.”

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City focuses on relationship-building to head off gang growth

By Jennifer Gritz

Obstacles and barriers were on the table at the June 1 meeting of Portland’s Gang Violence Task Force. Limited funding, organizations fighting for the same funds, not knowing what resources are available, inability to share information across agencies due to confidentiality issues — all interfere with effective partnering among groups that could work together. Community issues — poverty, parental apathy, and not having age-appropriate services available, especially in the 15-21 age range — also complicate their efforts.

Regina Williams of Northwest County Community Outreach emphasized that the focus had to be on how to get the services to the youth.

“What is offered until curfew?” she asked. “What do the kids want to do?”

The task force, part of Mayor Tom Potter’s Office of Youth Violence Prevention (OYVP), passed its first anniversary in July. With OYVP-funded services just getting under way, it is too early to determine whether the groups have made a measurable impact on youth violence.

“The focus of this office is to keep youth from harming themselves and/or others,” OYVP Director John Canda emphasized.

“We operate in Portland based on the ‘three-level’ approach, which means prevention, intervention and law enforcement. ... One by itself won’t make the difference; all need to be funded in order for positive change to occur.”

Potter created OYVP in July 2006 to combat the escalating gang activity in Portland and to get grant money to organizations doing that work. According to the office’s website, Portland has seen a 31.5 percent increase in gang membership since 2003, with gang activity expanding out of the North/Northeast regions into the entire metropolitan area.

Canda also chairs the Gang Violence Task Force, a collective body of law enforcement officials, representatives of nonprofit organizations and concerned citizens. One of the major challenges facing the OYVP is bringing the community’s resources together to form strategic partnerships. This is where the GVTF plays a vital role.

“We have to learn to talk to each other and work more closely together,” Canda stated. “We as individuals and as institutions have to realize when making decisions that our decisions really do affect our partners and keep our partners’ opinions and limitations in mind.”

During its first year, the OYVP was focused on the grant process and going through grant applications. Now, as the OYVP gears up for

its second year of operation, that grant money is about to be utilized for the first time in a number of youth-targeted services.

According to Canda, the office was granted \$400,000 from the city’s general fund for the first grant cycle.

“These dollars are strictly for the purposes of prevention and intervention services, not for law enforcement purposes,” Canda stressed.

The GVTF meets bimonthly and is attended by representatives of the nonprofit organizations working to provide at-risk youth services, law enforcement officials from the Portland Police Bureau, as well as representatives from the Parks & Recreation Department and the Office of Neighborhood Involvement. The meetings provide concerned individuals and groups with an overview of recent gang-related activity and a forum for learning about programs and services offered by other organizations. In addition, the GVTF is workshopping methods and strategies to identify problems and barriers to bring multiple services and solutions together.

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