Akron program gets down to grass-roots with partnership money

Groups must match funds; efforts help education, parades, gardens and cleanup

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These and many other activities will be funded this year through Akron's Neighborhood Partnership Program — small, matching grants to groups across the city that are able to do a lot with little money.

"It's grass-roots at its best," said Sharron Connor of Residents Improving Goodyear Heights (RIGHT), a group that manages to fund a dozen activities and events with its annual grant from the program.

Akron City Council on Monday approved the grants for this year, with about $200,000 awarded to 40 groups.

The program, started in 1997, is a joint venture of the city and the Akron Community Foundation, which each contribute $100,000. Neighborhood groups receive $500 to $7,500, which they are required to match. The groups also must provide documentation showing what they've done with the money.

Since it began, the program has provided $2.6 million to 475 projects.

Half of Akron's funding comes from Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) money, while the other half is from income taxes.

Akron formerly solicited ideas from residents about how to spend its CDBG funds. Helen Tomic, the city's comprehensive planning manager, thinks the Neighborhood Partnership Program is a better way for residents to decide what the money should go toward.

"This is what they want to do to help the community," she said.

Tomic said the city doesn't tell groups what they should be doing and encourages innovative ideas.

"We are open to doing something new," she said.

Not all of the groups that apply get funding because there isn't enough to meet the demand. Akron had 66 applications asking for nearly $382,000 this year. Representatives from the city and Akron Community Foundation decide which programs make the cut.

During a recent council Planning Committee meeting, Councilwoman Linda Omobien asked why the Boys & Girls Club wasn't getting a grant this year. The organization requested $5,000.

Tomic explained that the Akron Community Foundation already is planning to provide significant funding to the Boys & Girls Club this year and asked that the money be funneled to a program not slated to receive funds. The city also is giving money to the Boys & Girls Club.

John Garofalo, vice president of community investment for the Akron Community Foundation, thinks the smaller grants provided through the Neighborhood Partnership Program are more meaningful to the neighborhoods receiving them than the larger grants the foundation awards.
“They are able to do so much with it and reach a wide number of people,” he said.

New projects being funded this year include a community outreach parade and festival at Hawkins Ballpark, a master plan for East Akron Neighborhood Development Corp., a trash can project for Akron-area recreation centers and a Night Out Against Crime at Summit Lake.

NEOhaus Institute, which received funding from the program for the first time last year, was awarded $5,000 this year.

Tom Crain, who heads NEOhaus, said the group plans to expand on the community garden it built at Mason elementary, adding a greenhouse made of PVC pipe and plastic to allow for year-round growing. The group also plans to offer classes about canning and cooking fresh vegetables.

“We don’t have a kitchen per se, but we will bring in woks and grills,” Crain said. “That would be really fun for the neighborhood.”

The Neighborhood Partnership Program is the primary funding source for Connor’s RIGHT group, which has received annual grants since 2000. RIGHT used its funding to build a gazebo in Goodyear Heights that is used during numerous community events and to add a mural to the side of the Linda Theater.

This year, RIGHT plans to use its $7,500 for its bimonthly newsletter, with 2,000 copies distributed, and numerous activities offered throughout the year, including a Dr. Seuss Reading Day at the elementary schools, an Easter egg hunt, Flag Day ceremony, Neighborhood Night Against Crime block party, community kids yard sale and trick-or-treat party.

Connor said RIGHT is hoping to find local churches or businesses that will take over the funding of some of these annual activities so that the group can undertake another big project along the lines of the gazebo and mural.

“We don’t want to lose those nice neighborhood activities,” she said. “If we don’t get anyone to take up the slack, we will commit to them.”

Connor said the group has “tons of ideas on the horizon.”

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