

Claiming a Seat at the Table:
How the Lowell Avenue Civic Association
became a more effective voice
for the neighborhood

By Robert J. Mulvey

A case study of grassroots neighborhood revitalization, reviewing how a civic association for a 4,500 person, low and moderate income residential neighborhood, following the Circles of Hope™ process, and with the help of university faculty and students, gained insights into the history and current condition of their neighborhood, framed a vision of its future and embarked on an improvement plan.

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CLAIMING A SEAT AT THE TABLE¹

By Robert J. Mulvey²

This case study records the steps taken by the Lowell Avenue Civic Association (LACA) from March, 1998 through June, 2000 as they undertook a facilitated neighborhood self-study, chose priorities for action and designed an approach to deal with some well-defined neighborhood problems. In the process, LACA conducted two focus groups, an opinion survey, five participatory planning and design sessions and a culminating grassroots design meeting. They were assisted in these undertakings by faculty and students from the Sociology Department of Stony Brook University and the School of Architecture of New York Institute of Technology (NYIT). In response to the participatory planning and design sessions conducted by LACA, the Town of Islip Planning Department designed and obtained funding for specific improvements in the neighborhood and in the area surrounding the Long Island Railroad's Central Islip Station. By the end of the two-year period, LACA had gained a "seat at the table" for remediation money³ which will become available as the Central Islip revitalization continues.

The grassroots neighborhood capacity-building process that made these changes possible is called *Circles of Hope*TM. It was designed and facilitated by New Directions Community-Based research Institute, Inc.

A Suburban Community in Transition

The Lowell Avenue neighborhood is an ethnically diverse, low to moderate income place with 1,200 small, single-family, detached homes in an area one mile long north to south and a half mile wide. These are older homes available at affordable prices. There are 4,500 people living in this neighborhood and a high proportion are newcomers. In 1990, 25 percent of the population were under 18 years of age. The neighborhood offers opportunities for young, growing families with modest incomes to buy homes and start their quest for the suburban version of the American dream. Lowell Avenue, however, is in need of continuing renovation of its housing stock and public facilities if it is to remain attractive to new home buyers.

Central Islip, the hamlet and school district in which Lowell Avenue is located, is experiencing an explosion of new construction and adaptive re-use of existing buildings. Many projects committed to in the 1990's (\$1.2 billion in commitments) have been built and brought into use in the last five years. These include the Cohalan court complex, a minor league ball field for The Long Island Ducks, several residential developments, an industrial park and a new regional commercial development. Under its bold master plan of the 1980's, the Town of Islip established an Economic Development Zone and purchased 450 acres of state land which

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³Real estate developers contribute remediation money to the town so that it has the capital funds necessary to provide adequate infrastructure for the new developments.

became available with the closing of the state mental hospital. A great wave of physical and institutional development is now engulfing Central Islip. What might it mean for Lowell Avenue?

Beginnings, 1997

In 1997, the Citigroup Foundation, on the recommendation of Michelle DiBenedetto, funded a joint venture of New Directions and the NYIT School of Architecture and Design. Its purpose was to foster urban design literacy and develop community appreciation for the value of design, planning and development services. In an outreach effort, New Directions organized a series of breakfasts at NYIT and invited local development organizations (LDO's), the federal agencies HUD, FHA and FNMA, bankers, and local government community development agencies. As a result of these breakfasts, HUD offered to convey some of its foreclosed, single-family homes to interested LDO's at reasonable prices. FHA and other lending would also be made available for rehabilitation of houses and sale to eligible first time home buyers. NYIT offered design and development services to interested LDO's.

The Central Islip Civic Council (CICC) accepted HUD's offer and took ownership of several foreclosed properties in the Lowell Avenue neighborhood, where over 50 homes were vacant and abandoned. CICC worked with the Long Island Housing Partnership and Fannie Mae to complete acquisition, rehabilitation and resale of the homes. It did not choose to accept NYIT's offer to assist in these small scale housing developments, but it did introduce New Directions and its academic associates to their housing specialist, Barbara Walsh, who was also an officer in the Lowell Avenue Civic Association. At CICC she had played a pivotal and tireless role in the 400-home redevelopment of a blighted neighborhood formerly know as Carleton Park, as it was transformed to the award winning College Woods community. Over time, she had developed a respectful working relationship with the Town of Islip's Planning Department and other municipal agencies.

When Robert Mulvey offered to help the Lowell Avenue neighborhood by introducing participatory planning with access to information and university resources so that they could identify and address critical issues facing their neighborhood, Barbara Walsh and other members of the LACA were interested.

Grassroots Community Building

The Lowell Avenue experience from 1998 through 2000 and continuing represents an early example of the possibilities inherent in grassroots community building. The Lowell Avenue neighborhood shows early evidence that Sy Syms' slogan, "An informed consumer is our best customer" also applies to neighborhoods looking for help from local government. We at New Directions believe that this process holds promise of making contributions to the field of community development, here on Long Island and elsewhere. The lessons we see include the following ideas:

- (1) Community development work can be usefully viewed as containing an ongoing group learning process which is formalized and open to participation.
- (2) There are huge educational opportunities in the Long Island suburbs (two counties, 120 school districts, 500 or so neighborhoods).
 - (a) When people and their civic associations become better informed about their neighborhoods, they can move beyond their usual practice of protesting and complaining and become stewards of local values.
 - (b) University teams can support these people and their civic associations with community-based research, surveys, planning and designs.
 - (c) Informed civic associations can get the job done. They can be appropriate voices for their neighborhoods and effective partners for overextended local government.

In the fall of 1997, Professor Andrew Collver of the Sociology Dept. at Stony Brook University joined the New Directions team. First he would produce a report on population and housing from censuses up to 1990. After that, as architecture professors Michael Schwarting and Frances Campani with their students from NYIT conducted a physical survey of the neighborhood, he would work with the civic association to design and carry out an opinion survey of a sample of residents.

Circles of HopeTM. The process offered to LACA to facilitate its grassroots community-building efforts is a group learning process in which from 25 to 60 self-selected members of the civic association convene to undertake a self-study of their neighborhood. They reach agreement with their academic partners as to what studies are needed, and participate in the design and conduct of the studies to the extent that they have the time and skills for the work. The university faculty and students work with and for the civic group to develop a factual and insightful analysis of the neighborhood and its problems and potentials. Once the first basic chapters of the community insight document have been completed, the report is copied and made available to the citizens. This document then becomes the starting point for a civic dialogue that leads to framing of a vision for the future of the neighborhood and agreement on priorities for action to move toward the vision.

Circles of HopeTM is a four-step process and it took two years to introduce it in Lowell Avenue. It started with a step to develop community insight, followed by a step which facilitated the taking of a grassroots action planning decision and then a series of participatory program planning sessions. Finally, there is the grassroots implementation step, which continues to this writing. This group learning process develops the capacity for interested citizens to manage their own neighborhood in cooperation with local government, nonprofit organizations and business.

Step 1. Developing community insight

The Lowell Avenue Neighborhood Profile was a collaborative venture with a task force from LACA shaping the inquiry. It is in three parts: a demographic socioeconomic comparison section, a physical assessment section and an opinion survey. The Profile can be thought of as a loose-leaf file which can be added to with new subjects and/or revisited in the old sections to bring them up to date. It was published as a bound report and summarized as a brochure for easier access. It was begun in March, 1998 and published in April, 1999. (See end note.)

The chapter, "Population and Housing, 1940- 1990" showed Lowell Avenue in several dimensions: its make up (over 25% under 18 years of age), its income, value of homes, ethnic mix, and density and proximity to work. Corresponding information for the hamlet of Central Islip, Town of Islip, Suffolk County and Nassau County was also shown--all on the same sheet of paper. As a reader views this snapshot, several questions pop up; for example, are there sufficient facilities in this neighborhood to accommodate a population which is 25% below the age of 18 years? It's a thoughtful piece and we started the profile with it.

The second chapter, by architects and students from NYIT, is entitled, "Physical Survey, 1998." It presents observations and recommendations concerning the condition of residential streets, physical condition of the housing, trees, street lighting, surface drainage, the condition of the elementary school, recreation possibilities, shopping facilities, types of houses, yards and landscaping. The most striking conclusion was that the run-down appearance of the neighborhood was not due to poor maintenance by individual owners of homes. It was more a matter of neglect of public spaces by local government, businesses and institutions.

Chapter 3, "Opinion Survey, 1998," The people in Lowell Avenue had concentrated their comments on the physical infrastructure of their neighborhood, the quality of life as impacted by lack of code enforcement and police response to complaints, and also the gaping hole in recreational space or programs for its under-18 population. There were no surprises in the report, yet it galvanized the civic to get on with the job of dealing with these issues.

Step 2. Grassroots action planning

The leaders of LACA had time to consider the findings of this self-study. In early June, 1999, a brochure summarizing the highlights of the profile was distributed in the Lowell Avenue neighborhood. On Saturday, June 5, an all-day workshop entitled "Seeing Our New Civic Possibilities" was conducted with twenty-five Lowell Avenue residents. New Directions facilitated this visioning session, which discussed the profile, recent history of Central Islip, current trends and the issues highlighted in the profile. After lunch, the sessions sought consensus or common ground and the group agreed that they would have the best chance of results if they concentrated on improving the physical infrastructure. Therefore, from the several possibilities, an action plan to deal with the infrastructure was agreed to in the consensus process. This issue would bring LACA "to the table" where discussions were under way in connection with the current revitalization work in Central Islip.

Another step which was achieved at this session was the group's commitment to stay focused on the plan rather than revert to complaining about prior frustrations and promises made by developers and government officials which had been broken or disclaimed. Members were pleased with themselves as they enforced this new positive attitude.

LACA chose to concentrate on infrastructure as the topic for grassroots planning and design. They could have chosen housing strategies or the need and availability of youth services, among other items of neighborhood concern. As the revitalization energy unleashed by Islip's successful Master Plan for Central Islip continues, these later topics and other items of local concern might be candidates for subsequent grassroots community-building activity.

Step 3. Participatory program planning

New Directions scheduled a series of sessions at LACA's regular monthly meetings. In these sessions, the group was invited to participate in facilitated discussions of infrastructure design matters related to four different aspects of the neighborhood. NYIT architects and their students attended these sessions to hear the views of the neighborhood regarding these questions.

On October 19, 1999, seventy people attended a very spirited session to discuss possible improvements to the Central Islip railroad station on Lowell Avenue at the northwest corner of the neighborhood. Gene Murphy from the Town of Islip Planning Department was there also. He and the Long Island Railroad's architect heard requests to improve parking, traffic flow, esthetic appearance and pedestrian access. Other big issues concerned the blatant lack of neighborliness or respect on the part of large property owners. The Town undertook to review land covenants with a large food chain's warehouse facility, just to mention one example.

On November 16, 1999, forty-five people attended the second of these participatory planning sessions. This time, the subject was the appearance and functioning of the elementary school located in the heart of the neighborhood. The school superintendent attended and explained the restraints the school had to operate under and its special need to manage its students during the day. Nonetheless, he was willing to have a conversation. This was an energetic session. It covered several topics: the traffic patterns in the morning as kids arrive, puddles of water on rainy days, the possibilities of improving the school's appearance and the inappropriateness of having a small play park in front of the school, possible other locations on school property for a park, and the question of security associated with any improvements. Several people spoke of other schools having very inviting entrance arrangements and then later someone noticed that a cluster of homes might be developed on school property in the rear of its playing fields. Surrounding the play with housing would focus more eyes on the park, adding to its safety and usefulness.

The most interesting discussion highlighted the difficulty of planning critically necessary parks and recreation facilities without a comprehensive youth services program including proper supervision and security. This dilemma was at the heart of Lowell Avenue's concerns. Several

years ago, at the request of neighbors, the Town had decommissioned a park that had become a public nuisance due to illegal, unsupervised, unruly use. This was a sobering meeting and it suggested a next step for strategic consideration after the infrastructure topic was concluded. How might a school, town and civic partnership jointly address this issue of youth services to their mutual advantage?

On February 1, 2000, the civic association convened a special meeting to discuss the streetscape issues highlighted in the Lowell Avenue Neighborhood Profile. Twenty-five attendees discussed this topic in a facilitated dialogue which highlighted several points to the NYIT architectural team and the town planner. First, LACA and the residents were primarily concerned with the improvements to Lowell Avenue, a heavily traveled roadway that forms the boundary between the neighborhood and NYIT. They especially wanted to see more respectful maintenance of non-residential properties along Lowell Avenue. This issue moved the focus of the infrastructure discussion to the periphery of the neighborhood and away from the physical assessment done by NYIT. Yet the town planner, Gene Murphy, heard these appeals very clearly and said he would move ahead with improvements within his jurisdiction and use his influence to gain cooperation of businesses and NYIT.

The group agreed with the assessment of NYIT's architects regarding all the interior street conditions. On the question of beautification within the neighborhood, two points were discussed. Neighbors should be encouraged to continue their efforts to maintain and beautify sump boundaries and an effort should be undertaken which would find landscaping companies from within the neighborhood to adopt available spots for planting and beautification. Several examples of nearby neighborhoods' green spaces were cited for comparison.

On February 24, 2000, Frances Campani, Chairperson of NYIT's Architectural Program at the Central Islip campus, outlined her students' response to these participatory planning sessions. NYIT's design tied Cherry Street of the Lowell Avenue neighborhood into the campus of NYIT, where a park would be located. Cherry Street east to the Mulvey Elementary School was improved with trees, sidewalk and appropriate lighting. This design could be replicated for the other east/west streets. The NYIT design was integrated with the Town of Islip design for Lowell Avenue improvements. This blueprint for infrastructure improvement was offered to the Lowell Avenue task force by NYIT and the Town Planning Department.

Step 4. Grassroots implementation

The last step in the *Circles of Hope™* community-building process is where the neighborhood considers setting up its own self-help solutions to deal with problems that are not adequately addressed by existing agencies and programs. In March, 2000, New Directions had concluded the design of a grassroots Neighborhood Realty Service program under a grant from the Citigroup Foundation. In designing this program, Citibank's Community Affairs V.P., Michelle DiBenedetto, arranged a meeting with the representatives of the Long Island Housing Partnership, who agreed to make low interest loans available to local development corporations to restore foreclosed abandoned homes in partnership with civic associations.

Based on her experience with problems of housing abandonment, Barbara Walsh believed this would be a worthy part of Lowell Avenue's grassroots implementation efforts in connection with the infrastructure improvement plan. She became actively involved in presenting this plan to the Central Islip Civic Council, the local development corporation of which she was a board member.

When the CICC Board failed to vote on the proposal at its meeting in April it began to appear that they and some members of the LACA were more interested in using their energies to promote the general improvement of Central Islip with emphasis on downtown restoration. They felt that an improved downtown would improve the demand for housing in Lowell Avenue and that would eliminate the abandonment problem and improve the neighborhood.

LACA became a member of the Downtown Task Force which was interested in safeguarding and restoring the Central Islip business district. The task force would restore an old Methodist church on Wheeler Road, analyze the demographics surrounding this shopping area, inventory the businesses and explore transportation improvements. The major focus of local plans would be to promote Central Islip as the home of the Long Island Ducks baseball team. Its objective would be to assimilate the benefits of the current revitalization boom into the old business sector and lift Central Islip out of a downward drift that had begun with the closing of the state mental hospital twenty years earlier. Lowell Avenue would have its housing problem solved by new people moving into a revitalized Central Islip.

The failure to obtain CICC's cooperation on the neighborhood realty services plan, the change of emphasis from residential to downtown improvements, and some changes in the leadership of LACA all worked to blur the strong positive focus that had been achieved before. In June, at the monthly civic association meeting, NYIT and the Town presented their responses to the civic association's requests. These included improvements to the east side of the NYIT campus, facing the neighborhood, and, from the town, a street lighting assessment for safety, new sidewalks and tree planting. Residents who were at the meeting showed little interest in these plans that had been worked out so carefully over the previous two years, and instead fell into their more accustomed role of complaining about local government's services.

Bringing the Parties Together

New Directions recruits university professors and their students to work with civic groups and help them build better neighborhoods in partnership with their local government, nonprofit agencies and business. This service succeeds when it brings a benefit to the several interests which are brought together in the design and implementation of the *Circles of Hope*TM grassroots community-building process. Therefore, it must fit the needs and constraints of municipal governments, university faculty and neighborhood civic associations.

Local government. The small area analysis of a neighborhood of ½ sq. mile in a town of 120 sq. miles is a very useful planning tool but it is not provided for in the budgets of Long Island municipalities. Thus it is a niche that is not currently being filled. Gene Murphy of the

Town of Islip readily acknowledged this situation. In a neighborhood like Lowell Avenue with a long history of useful cooperation with citizens, it is a service that can be leveraged by the Town. In addition, the Town of Islip Planning Department had a long history of using university interns. Even with the no-cost aspect of acquiring these professionals in training, there is a need for the Town to supervise them and assign them to specific projects. With the New Directions arrangement, the supervision is in the hands of faculty and the assignment or team-building dimension is in the hands of the New Directions project leader. In Lowell Avenue, this arrangement worked very well for the Town of Islip's Planning Department. The study and the community feedback from it helped NYIT and the Town Planning Dept. to identify the most effective projects on which to expend ever-limited resources.

University faculty and students. University faculty welcome opportunities to offer service learning experiences to their students. An individual professor is not in a position to establish a program within which he might offer these service learning experiences to his students. Therefore, when New Directions has established a program, it is very attractive to a wide range of professors from all the area universities. In addition, New Directions has the ability to build teams from the several academic associates with whom it has currently established working arrangements. This team-building dimension allows an individual faculty member to stay clearly within one discipline while offering students the opportunity of working on interdisciplinary projects. New Directions is able to offer university faculty these service learning opportunities and to help establish community service situations for the several institutions represented on the team that is working in a given community.

Civic associations. There is a ground swell of grassroots interest in community revitalization throughout Long Island, but citizens need to learn how to approach this task. The *Circles of Hope™* grassroots community-building process brings a series of skills to its participants. Over time, these allow a neighborhood or community to develop the capacity to manage a sustainable future. Many capabilities are developed as citizens go through the process. Just six of them are discussed below.

Visioning is the ability of the civic to see the future of the neighborhood and be a strong voice for realization of that future. The *Circles of Hope™* visioning component allowed a neighborhood's spirit and confidence to develop through facilitated communication among people joining together to solve problems; it was a way to mobilize and inspire civic members, to develop consensus and to solve problems.

Ability to identify problems. The civic leadership was able to forge a series of questions which validated its own awareness of the issues in its neighborhood. The cumulative effect of hearing from its neighbors on these questions produced an energy and determination to move forward with its self-study.

Ability to investigate critical issues. The descriptive summaries and insights offered in the Lowell Avenue Neighborhood Profile armed the citizens with objective information to support the positions that they would take on questions of infrastructure, youth services, etc

Ability to reach consensus. The *Circles of Hope™* process allowed the civic leaders to listen to each other in connection with issues and trends affecting their neighborhood. It allowed them to find a common ground regarding the most likely area that they could work on to get a result and then to jointly decide on an action plan. This is an inspiring and affirming experience, one that offers hope and confidence to the group.

Ability to offer solutions. The *Circles of Hope™* dialogue offers the ability to produce solutions in an especially respectful way since the solutions are designed by, with and for the civic association working in conjunction with university and municipal resources. In this way, an appreciation of participatory planning and design is experienced.

Ability to manage (to come "to the table"). The participatory design process took ideas from NYIT and the Town Planning Department to solve the problems on the minds of the civic leaders. So, at the end of this phase of the process, the civic has a list of specific improvements that it will advocate. This list is in place as the continued revitalization in Central Islip proceeds as a result of the Carleton Avenue Corridor Master Plan. Therefore, when a project comes into development which requires a zoning change and the possibility of remediation money being deposited with the Town, Lowell Avenue's wish list is in place. The civic association has a management capacity it lacked prior to the *Circles of Hope™*.

The second evidence of this management capacity is the ability to go with the Town Planning Department and speak to the school district regarding possible improvements to the neighborhood school. Again, the design allows the civic association to specifically request improvements that grew out of the *Circles of Hope™* process.

Yet another management benefit to the Lowell Avenue Civic Association, based on its grassroots community-building exercise, is the inclusion of its leadership in the Downtown Task Force for Central Islip. Here is the voice of a residential neighborhood sitting at the table with the Chamber of Commerce interests. This is an especially appropriate and strong benefit since downtown investment should be directed with an informed awareness of possible residential impacts.

Finally, the attitude of the Lowell Avenue Civic Association at several points in the *Circles of Hope™* process departed from the typical not-in-my-backyard (NIMBY) approach of complaining and finding fault, to a positive, determination to define and promote local values. This experience of working together on the infrastructure may well inspire them to look at other neighborhood issues such as the lack of youth services or the need for a neighborhood housing strategy.

Suburban Revitalization - An Evolving Phenomenon

The revitalization of Central Islip, a hamlet of 25,000 people, is a success story unfolding on schedules set in motion twenty-five years ago. Due to the scale of revitalization, it offers a lesson in the sequencing of change in suburban hamlets. In 1974, New York State announced

plans to use its 800-acre hospital facility for the development of 2,200 units of public housing. This plan would be phased in as the hospital consolidated its remaining mental patients and moved them to other facilities or released them to community resident programs. The hospital finally closed entirely in 1996. This announcement set in motion a planning process spearheaded by the Town of Islip, the results of which are exploding into evidence today in 2001. It is useful to consider the timing of this process in order to put the Lowell Avenue *Circles of Hope*TM community-building process into a context for evaluation.

It took almost ten years for the Town of Islip to marshal the political and economic capital required to launch this massive revitalization. By the mid 80's, the Town had acquired 450 acres of the 800-acre state facility, established a Central Islip Economic Development Zone and adopted a Master Plan for the Carleton Avenue corridor in Central Islip. In 1983, NYIT purchased 350 acres of that land to establish its Central Islip campus. This was the anchor client for the selling of the Central Islip Revitalization Plan.

During the next ten years, this master plan was sold to large investors including State and Federal Court Administrations, a law school, three large residential developers, a minor league ball field, an industrial park developer and a retail complex developer. All of these deals required complex financing and organizational negotiations.

In 1992, the Cohalan Court Complex opened and, in 1994, the 400-unit College Woods residential development was selling out. During the 1990's, \$1.2 billion of investment was attracted to this Central Islip revitalization scheme. A tide was coming in and by 2001 all of these developments were being built out. Essentially, the face of Central Islip has been physically transformed in the last five years.

The beginning of yet another phase is taking shape at this time. It is the secondary developments that are being approved. Here, smaller developers are responding to the new environment and are joining in. Often these developers will request zone changes to allow them to build a site more intensely than the zoning ordinance allows. In these cases, if the hardships are established and the benefits are clear, permission is often granted to build but the developer has to contribute remediation money to the town so that it has the capital funds necessary to provide adequate infrastructure for these new developments.

This new phase is quite interesting since the decision making surrounding the budgeting of this remediation money and other capital funds will affect the existing downtown, the neighborhoods of Central Islip and the educational and cultural arrangements that make up the experience of living in Central Islip. This is the backdrop or context within which the Lowell Avenue grassroots community-building process can be more fully appreciated.

As this tide of development rushes into Central Islip, a key question to consider is whether it will raise all the boats that are resting in this lagoon. The *Circles of Hope*TM grassroots group learning process produces a growing shared awareness of neighborhood conditions, trends, hopes and plans. The future of Central Islip will be better due to the bold planning of the Town of Islip

and the courage of early investors in its visionary Master Plan. How these benefits will be shared and directed will be determined by how well Central Islip organizes itself to facilitate these decisions and to build on the work of the last twenty-five years. How do we share the pie?

Expanding Participation

Long Island suburbs are being revitalized. Now, over 50 years after the building of Levittown, many suburban settlements are fifty years old and in need of revitalization. A huge transportation plan sets aside \$8 Billion to build and improve roads and perhaps to improve mass transportation. Downtowns all across Long Island are being restored. Housing stock here is thirty-five years old on average and in need of restoration and updating. A huge demand for change and updating has been taking shape and finding avenues of implementation in various locations. It is gathering momentum.

The planning process, which will direct all this energy, is itself changing. One key observation that is pertinent to this case study is a change in the mix of players who are finding their way to the table so that their voices can be heard in connection with the shape of community renewal.

New Directions sees the framework for planning in the suburbs taking shape around three points of view which will be institutionalized in new arrangements. The beginnings of these arrangements are currently in place and will lead to the introduction of different sources of information and communications of different perspectives. These players are:

- (1) Downtown task forces. This group has historically been most interested in development and promotion of a favorable environment for its activities. The Chamber of Commerce, in recent years, has developed a systematic approach for restoring downtowns. Their Main Street Revivals have looked at markets, inventoried stores, coordinated transportation and downtown design to produce a more attractive downtown. This effort has been much in evidence on Long Island for several years.
- (2) Community summits. In 1994, the school district of Bay Shore-Brightwaters held a community meeting that attracted over 1000 people. Its new superintendent, Evelyn Holman, had brought an idea from suburban Maryland, where local residents lived in communities (school districts) without a local government, like many of the hamlets on Long Island. The school spearheaded the organization of a Central Islip Summit Council which would be the voice of the community. The Summit Council worked in conjunction with a very active Chamber of Commerce, which had been busy restoring Bay Shore's downtown. The Summit Council focuses on cultural, educational and quality of life issues. It conducts annual meetings and has a local agenda which receives a lot of attention. It is being copied in other Long Island school districts. In 1999, Central Islip's first summit attracted over 700 people.

- (3) Neighborhood and hamlet civic associations. The *Circles of Hope™* grassroots community-building process allows residential civic associations to attract university resources to help them envision and plan better places and to form partnerships with their local governments to achieve their dreams. This is the voice of the neighborhood.

This combination of Chamber of Commerce, Summit Council and informed neighborhood civic associations will serve to represent the various interests that shape our communities. Together, they have an opportunity to devise ways to establish, manage and maintain quality communities.

More about Lowell Avenue Neighborhood

New Directions, 1999. *Lowell Avenue Neighborhood Profile*. Accessible at www.newdirectionsabr.org. Click on Library, then Bookstore.