

West Bank Community Coalition
Response to Robert Thompson's Critique
February 14, 2008

In his letter dated January 15, 2008, Robert Thompson, NRP downtown staff assigned to the Cedar Riverside neighborhood, presents a litany of misconceptions and faulty thinking about the West Bank Community Coalition (WBCC) that requires an equally lengthy and detailed response. However, for now we will provide a limited number of highlights and examples to unveil the nature of the critique.

Mr. Thompson's critique is flawed because it

1. lacks any semblance of due process,
2. is based in part on a strange and apparently very personal notion of democratic process and financial accountability and
3. is largely based on unsubstantiated hearsay.

1. Due Process

Mr. Thompson's letter is apparently his justification for not considering the WBCC for its rightful role as the neighborhood organization in the City's NRP process in Cedar Riverside. As such it is a judgment and decision that will have a major impact on the organization and the neighborhood. Due process would assume that a.) there is some established standard (not necessarily a law but some written policy) that has been violated by the accused b.) there is an opportunity for the accused to hear the evidence against them and c.) that the accused have an opportunity to defend themselves against these accusations. It would also be good if the judge were not also the prosecutor.

Mr. Thompson claims that he is applying a standard but publicly admits that it is not written down anywhere. This is like having a trial without a law and invites arbitrary and personally motivated judgments. The evidence in the January 15th letter is news to the WBCC Board. Mr. Thompson reports complaints from third parties that never complained to the WBCC and he never offers the WBCC an opportunity to tell their side of the story. Nor did he provide the WBCC with an opportunity to correct any of the alleged problems. Mr. Thompson's letter is basically unsubstantiated evidence that is arriving after the accused has been hung for violating a non-existent law.

2. Personalized standards

A. Democratic Process- Mr. Thompson seems to be operating on a strange notion of democratic process. His first bullet point is labeled "transparency and openness in the organization". He describes an election during an annual meeting in which a group of residents organized themselves into a slate based on a shared vision of what the organization should be doing and recruited their neighbors to vote for the whole slate. He objects to this because he says this "appeared to be conducted by some members of the

Board at the expense of others.” In other words, some people lost in the elections while others won. It’s hard to imagine a democratic process where this could never occur.

Even worse however is his proposed solution. He says the WBCC Board should have a process that would require the incumbents to approve any slate used in the election. He appears to be suggesting that the WBCC violate the constitutional rights of anyone who might challenge the policies and practices of the current Board. This is hardly a democratic ideal. In fact it would undermine the purpose and value of having open elections.

B. Financial Management- Mr. Thompson’s critique of WBCC financial practices runs upstream against common sense. He claims that the WBCC should have a higher “tolerance for ambiguity and error”. This is an unusual standard for financial management. This is especially true since the administrative system Mr. Thompson established (and is the basis for the present dispute) places administrative responsibility for hundreds of thousands of dollars of public funding on the WBCC but provides it with only \$2,000 in operating funds. WBCC volunteers are therefore forced into doing the work of professional staff. A high tolerance for error would not be a good quality for those volunteers to cultivate.

Mr. Thompson also fails to mention that the recently completed review of WBCC financial procedures by the state auditor produced no negative findings. The auditor also found that past problems that had occurred before most of the current board members had ever served on the WBCC board had been corrected. Certainly this information should be part of any unbiased critique of the organization’s performance. I am attaching a copy of the audit for your reference.

Furthermore, the new Cedar Riverside NRP organization that will be contracting with NRP to administer the Cedar Riverside NRP Action Plan has made it clear to Mr. Thompson that it intends to hire a fiscal agent to manage the human resource and fiscal duties that come with administration. It appears that this organization will be paying a professional fiscal agent up to 10% of the NRP funds it handles to fulfill the duties that WBCC Board members had been doing as unpaid volunteers. While the Cedar Riverside NRP Program was under the administration of the WBCC, board members on several occasions corrected or prevented oversights by the NRP steering committee that could have had significant consequences. This record is a testament to the value and capacity of the WBCC’s fiscal management ability.

3. Unsubstantiated hearsay

A. Abusive behavior- Mr. Thompson claims to be aware of numerous cases of abusive behavior. He says the WBCC should be respectful and avoid blaming. These sound like the good rules enforced in a child care center but so far have not been extended to cover the City Council, the State Legislature, or community organizations in the City of Minneapolis. The problem here is that people can feel abused even by respectful behavior

especially if emotion is involved. There is also the possibility that abusive behavior may go in both directions, there is always the sticky question of who started it, and there is the matter of whether respectful behavior has gone in both directions.

Mr. Thompson dispenses with these subtleties (along with due process). He accepts allegations from third parties without talking to the accused and holds the WBCC accountable for the allegations rather than any proven event. He also doesn't seem to limit his criticism to things that allegedly occur in WBCC meetings.

A more serious allegation comes with his claim that the conduct of WBCC meetings "discourages dissent and participation". This comes however with the admission that he hasn't attended a WBCC meeting in over two years. Other observers say they are impressed with the WBCC's diversity both in representing the diverse population in Cedar Riverside and in the wide range of ideas and opinions expressed. This point of view comes from people who have actually attended WBCC meetings.

B. Conflict of interest- Mr. Thompson raises concerns about conflict of interest without having reviewed the WBCC conflict of interest policy and practice. He admits that he has not attended WBCC Board meetings and relies on unsubstantiated third party reports that conflicts are not being reported.

Mr. Thompson also arbitrarily criticizes the fact that some WBCC Board members also serve on the Board of the West Bank CDC. Even though NRP Policy specifically allows this overlap, Mr. Thompson says it is problematic enough to be considered in his decision to disqualify the WBCC from NRP administration. On the other hand, he seems to have no problem with the even greater overlap between the Cedar Riverside Business Association and the NRP steering committee he intends to empower to run the program in the future. We see no problem with a properly disclosed overlap but the standard used to make these kinds of judgments should be applied to everyone equally.

Summary

Mr. Thompson's critique is flawed because it lacks due process, uses unwritten standards that are arbitrarily applied to the WBCC and bases its findings on hearsay while overlooking verifiable evidence from third parties. It is wrong because it is an insult to the hard working volunteers on the WBCC Board, it is a blow to democracy because it attacks the only elected board that represents the great diversity of the Cedar Riverside neighborhood, and it is a blow to a more inclusive society because it ignores the progress made by the WBCC in engaging the many immigrant communities that call Cedar Riverside their home.