

A COUNTY AND ITS CITIES: THE IMPACT OF HENNEPIN COMMUNITY WORKS

JUDITH A. MARTIN AND JUSTIN P. JACOBSON
University of Minnesota

Hennepin Community Works (HCW) is a county-led Twin Cities' redevelopment program. It offers a model for county involvement in urban improvement efforts, leading with the infrastructure work that counties typically perform routinely. Since the early 1990s, HCW initiatives have put close to \$200 million of new investment into parkways, rail-to-trail programs, corridor reconstruction amenities, environmental remediation, and new housing throughout Hennepin County, with the bulk going to Minneapolis, the largest city. The quality of life enhancements produced by this program would be unattainable without the county's leadership.

A policy literature interest in the roles of counties in urban development has emerged recently. This new wave chronicles an expanded county role in metropolitan governance, suggesting that future county roles may differ substantially than those of the past. Urban county governments have traditionally had little visible intersection with other levels of local government. But some urban counties in Indiana, Florida, and elsewhere have tried innovating, through city-county consolidations, or partnering in regional governmental initiatives.

Faced in the nineties with a growing imbalance between the declining prosperity of its core city (Minneapolis) and suburban municipalities, Hennepin County, Minnesota, pioneered a different path. In 1994, Hennepin County launched an urban redevelopment program, "Hennepin Community Works" (hereafter HCW) that clearly supplemented the more common models of county activity. HCW devised an entirely new redevelopment role for the county, and has consequently had a major impact on Minneapolis and its suburbs.

Since its inception, Hennepin County commissioners have committed close to \$200 million of infrastructure spending into a targeted redevelopment program with five goals: (1) to enhance the tax base; (2) to reshape troubled neighborhoods; (3) to improve transportation within the county; (4) to protect and develop green space; and (5) to create new jobs. While much of the U.S. urban past since the eighties has featured decreasing levels of public sector funding and involvement with urban affairs, Hennepin County voluntarily took on substantial additional financial and political commitments with this program.

Now in its 11th year of budgeted work, HCW has launched 19 projects, 11 of which are completed. These include spearheading efforts to improve Minneapolis' residential tax base through renovation of particular neighborhoods, and turning an essentially derelict railroad corridor into

Direct Correspondence to: Judith A. Martin, Department of Geography, University of Minnesota, 348 Social Science, Minneapolis, MN 55455. E-mail: jmartin@umn.edu.

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a well-used bike and pedestrian trail. This ambitious county program, its goals and outcomes, are examined here. Hennepin County's experience suggests possible new avenues of intergovernmental cooperation for simultaneously supporting the central city, and their county environs, in other metropolitan regions.

COUNTIES IN METROPOLITAN RESEARCH AND GOVERNANCE

Hennepin County's recent interventions could not have been predicted from most urban research. For the most part, county government has been prominently absent from the urban redevelopment literature. Such neglect is long standing: ninety years ago one scholar called counties "the dark continent of American politics" (Gilbertson, 1917; Menzel, 1996). More contemporary scholars echo these thoughts, consistently calling for greater study of these "still-forgotten governments" (Schneider & Park, 1989), and introducing ambitious research agenda to help address the many lacunae in scholarly knowledge (Benton, 2005; Menzel et al., 1992).

Counties' relative academic obscurity parallels a tendency in the popular media and in general political discourse to ignore county politics, processes, and impacts. As Teaford notes, there is much more public consciousness of Oakland, California, than of Oakland County, Michigan, even though the latter is three times more populous than the former (1997: 3). Even within metropolitan areas, county roles are often invisible, compared to those of city governments. In general, mayors' public profiles far exceed that of any county commissioner, even though the latter typically oversees larger bureaucracies with greater financial resources and a wider reach of responsibilities.

One likely reason for the scholarly neglect of counties is the work that usually defines these units of government: road repair and social services seldom evoke images of political innovation and leadership. Since the sixties, typical county responsibilities have been lodged in two distinct arenas: (1) providing service delivery for state and federal government programs and (2) as a stand-in municipal government for residents of unincorporated areas.

In the first arena, as agents of higher governmental levels, counties administer state services such as highway maintenance, welfare programs, elections, and public health, typically with no ability to influence the direction of these programs (Benton, 2002). U.S. counties have often been the professional, almost apolitical, implementing body for highly politicized decisions made at the state or federal level, thus deflecting attention. Recently, such responsibilities have grown with increasing governmental devolution (Berman & Salant, 1996). Decentralization of political authority and responsibility, from Washington, D.C., to state capitals, and then from state capitals to county seats, has given counties greater responsibility and more discretionary powers, usually without additional funding. As increasing numbers of unfunded mandates accrue, counties have become financially and legally responsible for programs they cannot afford. This problem was particularly acute in the nineties. For example, in the 1991 session of the California legislature only 11 of the 1,240 mandates to counties were accompanied by sufficient funding (Salant, 1991). Unfunded mandates are still imposed on counties today, and one analyst considers them a major driving force countrywide in the expansion of county budgets and staffs (Benton, 2002).

In their second role, as local governments for unincorporated, often rural areas county responsibilities have increased in recent years. But even here counties are largely tasked with basic service provision: law enforcement via the sheriff's office, and recording of land sales. Still, many newer residents in such areas now expect much more from local government, while past rural residents typically expected only limited services. County governments try to meet new challenges posed by both higher absolute numbers of residents demanding services and higher service-level expectations. Again, Los Angeles County is illustrative (Hoene, 2002). Los Angeles County has nearly 10 million residents, 900,000 of whom live in unincorporated areas. Providing law enforcement, fire protection, and other services to residents of this "unofficial" city is a major task, made larger

by discontinuous residence patterns. Such services cost the county over \$1.5 billion in 1997–1998 (Hoene, 2002, p. 581).

Beyond the traditional county roles just noted, other governmental relationships generally blur the lines between city and county government. Among these are 19th century city–county consolidations, epitomized by Boston, Philadelphia, and San Francisco. These and other pre-1950 city–county cooperative efforts are long-standing enough to be regarded as normative where they exist. Americans have routinely been suspicious of reform efforts to combine governmental structures, dedicated as we are to local control. But in the sixties and seventies a rash of new city–county consolidations took effect, including Nashville, Jacksonville, Indianapolis, and over a dozen cities of fewer than 100,000 people (Hamilton, 1999, pp. 96–98).

Since the nineties, several more consolidation efforts have succeeded with supporters arguing that they can bridge city/suburban acrimony and inequity, improve service efficiency, and create a favorable climate for economic development (Leland & Thurmaier, 2005). But most consolidation efforts have been defeated, and some skepticism has arisen questioning the wisdom of consolidation (Savitch & Vogel, 2004). Still, city–county consolidations have increased the profile of counties in the academic and popular presses, and led to new considerations of the role of the county in metropolitan governance.

A second new direction for counties involves regional governance, which has taken varied forms. Miami-Dade County (Florida) is the most ambitious example: a substantial reorganization of county powers and responsibilities, with Dade County acting as a type of federation, overseeing many of the functions traditionally reserved for cities alone (Hamilton, 1999). Metropolitan governance via inter-county cooperation is another precedent, best exemplified by the Twin Cities’ Metropolitan Council. Here, seven counties cooperate around “regional systems,” including transportation, land use planning, and wastewater treatment, and even share commercial and industrial property tax revenue under the aegis of the Metropolitan Council. Still, cities and counties maintain autonomy in most policy areas (Martin, 1998). Yet another variant in regional governance arrangements includes limited cooperation around specific cross-county issues, such as mass transit or environmental management, and formal agreements via special districts are legion.

Counties’ traditional roles as background players in local, metropolitan, and regional governance thus appear to be morphing. In some ways, American counties are changing in the aggregate, with the general devolution of federal and state responsibilities; some are even forging particular and unique administrative paths. Some recent scholarship has recognized that counties are undergoing transformation, but this new breed of counties has merited little scholarly attention. Both the public and the larger academic community remain generally unaware of these changes (Benton, 2005; Thomas, 1996). Counties are still not viewed as major forces of policy change or of metropolitan development, and their actual and potential roles have been essentially absent from the urban literature. The current literature that does exist focuses on changes in county political structures and intergovernmental relationships; little attends to novel county initiatives.

HENNEPIN COUNTY’S URBAN COMMITMENT

Perhaps no American county has recently been as innovative and ambitious as Minnesota’s Hennepin County, a mixed urban, suburban, and rural county of more than one million residents. HCW began here in 1994 as a public works program initially intended to address declining property values. Since then, HCW has significantly transformed portions of the county through major housing, transportation, parks, and environmental restoration investments. Through 2008, HCW launched nineteen projects, totaling \$197.5 million in investments. HCW has received national recognition for its efforts, including a 1999 award for county program innovation and a 2001 award for promoting inter-governmental cooperation (Blackstad, 2006; Joint Center for Sustainable Communities, 2001).

HCW is of interest in and of itself, but it also provokes more broadly applicable questions: As most U.S. metropolitan areas experience both sprawl at their edges and major inner city/suburban demographic challenges, how might responsible units of government respond more effectively? What role can counties play in a new strategy of inter-governmental urban redevelopment? Can county-led infrastructure investment point the way toward improved metropolitan futures? This specific case study cannot answer every possible question. But examining HCW's development, particularities, and general lessons could inspire a reassessment of traditional assumptions about counties and why they matter for contemporary metropolitan development.

HCW emerged in the early nineties out of a concerned discussion among Hennepin County commissioners and other local officials about declining Minneapolis property values. Former Commissioner Mark Andrew noted the worries in those years about increasing needs for social services, especially in Minneapolis. He thought that the county tax base had to be protected and grown to ensure the continuation of Human Resources programs (Andrew, 2006). Minneapolis had mainly escaped the sixties and seventies economic ravages that decimated many Rust Belt cities. But by the early nineties several parts of Minneapolis exhibited traits that made many fear for the future, including increased gangs, drugs, and crime in a few neighborhoods. The city's population had been gradually decreasing for several decades. With over 520,000 residents in 1950, Minneapolis comprised the bulk of Hennepin County's population and tax base. The city then lost population in each successive decade until the nineties; Census 2000 registered 382,618 residents (United States Census Bureau, 2007). Unlike many other cities, however, Minneapolis retained and grew its downtown tax base throughout this period, even as some of its residential neighborhoods declined precipitously. Meanwhile, most of the rest of Hennepin County grew at a healthy 64%, from 676,579 people in 1950 to 1,116,200 in 2000 (Puentes & Warren, 2006). First- and second-ring suburbs such as Bloomington, Edina, and Maple Grove generally gained what Minneapolis lost, both in population and economic development. As in most of urban America, the relationship between Minneapolis and its home county shifted dramatically in just a few decades.

Late eighties local policy debates provoked the genesis for new thinking about the county's role in the growing city/suburb discrepancies (Metropolitan Council, 1992). By then, the trend of struggling central cities and flourishing peripheries in the Twin Cities region was clear, though what this had to do with county government was not. Some policy analysts and politicians, mainly liberals, argued that the problems of decaying central city neighborhoods were a concern for the counties as a whole, not just the city, but most counties conveniently ignored these concerns (Orfield, 1997). Other analysts and policymakers, particularly those from prosperous suburbs, tended to view urban problems as failures of city leadership, and hesitated to divert county resources to support central cities (Brandt, 1994, 1995). While Rust Belt central cities lost people, jobs, and businesses, and areas beyond the city boundary flourished, county officials had little serious policy discussion about whether this trend could or should be checked or reversed.

Hennepin County's response to these same trends was unusual. The late eighties and early nineties concerns roughly paralleled those of elected officials elsewhere in older U.S. urban areas: worries about an eroding tax base in the central city and about the potential impact of this decline on the county's long-term financial health. But rather than remain detached, the Hennepin Commissioners chose to direct some available county resources to address concerns that were (and still are) typically seen as either local or federal responsibilities. They believed that the long-term health of the county and its central city were intertwined: the idea of writing off Minneapolis, as other cities had been written off, was simply unthinkable to many local elected and policy leaders.

THE IMPETUS FOR HCW

Two documents set the stage for HCW's formation. First, a 1991 County Capital Budgeting Task Force memo took stock of several hundred acres of potentially surplus properties controlled

by the county regional rail authority. The memo showed that the county owned property in some struggling parts of North Minneapolis, as well as a discarded rail corridor running alongside then-troubled Lake Street in South Minneapolis (Hennepin County CBTF, 1991). Both locations would soon provide opportunities for action. Then in 1992, the county assessor's office produced a startling residential property map, highlighting what came to be defined as "the problem" (Hennepin County Assessor's Office, 1992). This map visibly demonstrated that the only sections of Minneapolis to hold or gain property value in the eighties were those located adjacent to lakes, parks, or parkways. Everywhere else, property values had dropped—sometimes precipitously.

Hennepin County Commissioners Mark Andrew and Peter McLaughlin, who represented large segments of Minneapolis on the county board, became HCW's strongest proponents. Both were DFL board members and strong allies of Minneapolis Mayor Sayles-Belton, who welcomed the county's potential financial heft in addressing the city's property and financial challenges. Andrew and McLaughlin had each expressed great concern about Minneapolis' future health and seemed to think that the county should be doing more to assist the city. Both saw the connections between green space and property values as a possible way forward in this delicate political process (Shah, 1994).

Hennepin County staff began collecting massive data sets on factors beyond the usual socio-economic data, all of which became fodder for a massive GIS-based analysis. Some of the additional information concerned subjects somewhat disconnected from traditional economic development approaches, such as geological and hydrological data; transportation options; trail corridors and wildlife habitat; and the presence of cultural and religious institutions. In the end, more traditional data that positively correlated healthy property values with green space finally convinced policymakers that the county could play a role in urban transformation.

Throughout several months of 1992–1993, "summit" discussions took place between and among local elected officials (Hennepin county commissioners, Minneapolis city council members, and Park Board and School Board members) to determine what, if anything, the county might do to arrest Minneapolis' decline. In July of 1993, Commissioner McLaughlin synthesized these concerns in a memo suggesting an "employment, environment/public works, and tax-base development program" with the potential to rectify the human and tax-base costs of spreading urban decline. He defined the problem this way: "the public cost of this deterioration can be measured by the precipitous decline in tax revenues realized and the correspondent increase of public expenditures on income maintenance, police services, health care and social services" (McLaughlin, 1993). It is worth remembering that, in a devolving governmental world, social service provision was increasingly becoming each county's responsibility, whether it was prepared for this burden or not.

Hennepin County's response to this dilemma was notable for its ambition and scope. It would launch a proactive program to invest in new projects instead of staying on the sidelines. The proposed intervention was summarized thusly: "Hennepin County proposes to create jobs and tax-base growth by initiating public works projects in distressed neighborhoods and communities. . . . It is expected that by locating features such as parks, bicycle and walking paths, greenways, watercourses and recreation facilities in deteriorating neighborhoods and municipalities, that complementary housing and commercial development will be stimulated" (Hennepin County Board of Commissioners, 1993).

In August of 1993, a joint resolution representing the county, the city, and the school and park boards created a Study Commission to "examine the feasibility of joint development of parks and public works activities with the goals of job creation, tax base enhancement . . ." (McLaughlin, 1993). Principles established for the program included: fostering local support and being a catalyst for community investment; strengthening and creating community connections; leveraging natural resources and creating sustainable projects; promoting private enterprise and economically feasible projects; fitting into local government operations and promoting opportunity for

all communities; and having a measurable long-term impact. The resolution outlined respective roles and implementation procedures for the county, the city, the park board, and the school board (McLaughlin, 1993).

A potential work plan was adopted in December of that year. In May 1994, following the Study Commission report, the County Board approved a mission statement for HCW that addressed the importance of sustainable communities within natural systems. Parkways, rails-to-trails, and environmental reclamation, among other tools, would lead the way to both an improved tax base and better social outcomes for county residents. Without making firm commitments, specific projects (Midtown Greenway, day-lighting Bassett Creek, replacing brown fields with parks) were already prefigured (Engebretsen, 1994).

This flurry of administrative activity would be rapid for any public body. It was especially impressive for Hennepin County, which has long had some splits among the commissioners: Democratic/Republican political leanings; city and inner suburban interests versus outer suburban and rural interests. But the nineties' concerns about Minneapolis somehow superceded these divisions. It may have helped that several of the commissioners who represented outer portions of the county had long had deep city connections, having worked in the city or served on the boards of foundations or arts institutions. That all came together to support HCW is the strongest sign imaginable that the county felt some responsibility for the city's future.

HCW FORMATION AND STRUCTURE

In September 1994, in a bold display of "building bridges and making connections," the HCW project was approved by all affected governmental parties: the Hennepin County Board, the Minneapolis City Council, and the city's independent school and park boards. All were expected to partner in HCW's undertaking, and to align their budgets to meet the program's ambitions. A Joint Powers Board of the participating elected officials quickly established a "Parks/Public Works Study Commission" to demonstrate how improved public spending might achieve the goals identified, and to recommend potential projects. HCW would use specific goals to evaluate potential projects, including: (1) job creation potential; (2) tax-base enhancement potential; (3) goods and services provided to strengthen communities; and (4) the potential for maintenance and improvement of natural systems to increase investment (HCW, 1997, 1998). In addition to realigned public works' expenditures, Hennepin County officials expected that some federal money from the 1991 Inter-modal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act and the Clean Water program could be used for some projects. They also expected that state funds from Minnesota's lottery-funded environmental program would amplify county financial resources where appropriate.

While establishing new connections with other governmental entities, HCW also triggered a reorganization of the county's governance structure. HCW itself became a separate department within the county Public Works division; its work was to be supported by other departments within the same division, including Environmental Services and Transportation. Separate county entities, notably the County Regional Rail Authority and the County Housing and Redevelopment Authority, were also expected to aid HCW projects. Financially, HCW quickly became a substantial part of the county's capital and operating budgets. HCW's financial scope was left somewhat open-ended, but the implicit assumption was that multiple millions of dollars would be available annually for the program. Hennepin County's ongoing commitment to infrastructure upgrading implied an already substantial investment pool that would be expended in any case. HCW assumed commitments for additionally funding infrastructure at a level of approximately \$9–10 million annually (Blackstad, 2006). This willingness to take the lead on infrastructure was important: in many large development efforts, the 'first dollar' is often the largest stumbling

block. Once a project was begun, county officials would use county funds to leverage even more funding.

Hennepin County was careful to not overstep its legal and political bounds in this process. HCW simply expanded upon powers that the state government had already granted to the county, so it did not engender a struggle with the state. This was a program invented by elected officials, operating in their normal fiscal capacity and merely taking advantage of latent potential. HCW's organizational structure demanded that each of the governmental bodies involved vote support for a particular project independently. Every project also had to have the approval of the appropriate local municipality, via city council action, assuring that county plans could not trump local ones. Furthermore, all HCW projects had to go through the usual municipal regulatory processes, including neighborhood review, planning commission review, and environmental impact assessments. Long-time former HCW staffer Larry Blackstad noted that none of the HCW projects has ever been challenged in court, surely a testament to processes being in order (Blackstad, 2006).

In some ways, HCW resembles a modern version of the vaunted thirties Works Progress Administration (WPA) program, at a much smaller scale, of course. Like the WPA, the basic idea behind HCW was to use public revenue to stimulate job growth via physical infrastructure improvements. While generally agreeing with the comparison, Commissioner Andrew noted the difference in scale: this was just one county, working creatively to expand parks and green spaces while also stimulating new jobs and development in distressed city and suburban neighborhoods (Engebretsen, 1994).

HCW PROJECTS

Because HCW supporters wanted an early win, attention quickly focused on the already emerging Cedar Lake Trail, a privately funded rail-to-trail effort underway from St. Louis Park to Minneapolis (see Figure 1). Assistance here was regulatory, not financial: the trail needed some land controlled by the county's regional rail authority, which the county handed over. Since HCW had already established that natural-resource improvements were strongly connected to economic development, a set of proposals around additional potential rail conversions quickly emerged, including the Midtown Greenway across South Minneapolis. Transportation in general was another early focus, including additional bike trails, which generated a great deal of citizen support. Other early proposals included day-lighting Bassett Creek in North Minneapolis and recreating a filled-in Northeast Minneapolis wetland known as Sandy Lake. Because identified projects required partnerships with other governmental units, however, not all of the early ideas survived.

Through 2007, HCW completed or nearly completed 11 projects throughout the county (see Table 1). These included varied types of projects: the purchase and demolition of properties for redevelopment; physical rehabilitation of roadways with accompanying new commercial investment; "rails to trails" conversions; construction of new parks; an affordable housing program; transit-oriented development (TOD); and pollution cleanup. As of 2007, eight additional projects were funded, including significant corridor redevelopment plans (Hennepin County Office of Budget & Finance, 2005, 2006). While the bulk of HCW projects are in Minneapolis, each of the county's seven commissioner districts boasts at least one HCW project.

HCW's first direct redevelopment project was the Humboldt Avenue Greenway, which included demolition, new housing construction, and major environmental improvements. The multifaceted project began in 1997 with several objectives. First, HCW wanted to improve the housing stock of an older North Minneapolis neighborhood consisting primarily of small, low quality, and poorly maintained houses. Most were only about 740 square feet, having been built immediately after World War II (Humboldt Greenway, 2007). Second, HCW planners identified Shingle Creek, which ran through this area on its way to the Mississippi, as an underutilized green-space amenity

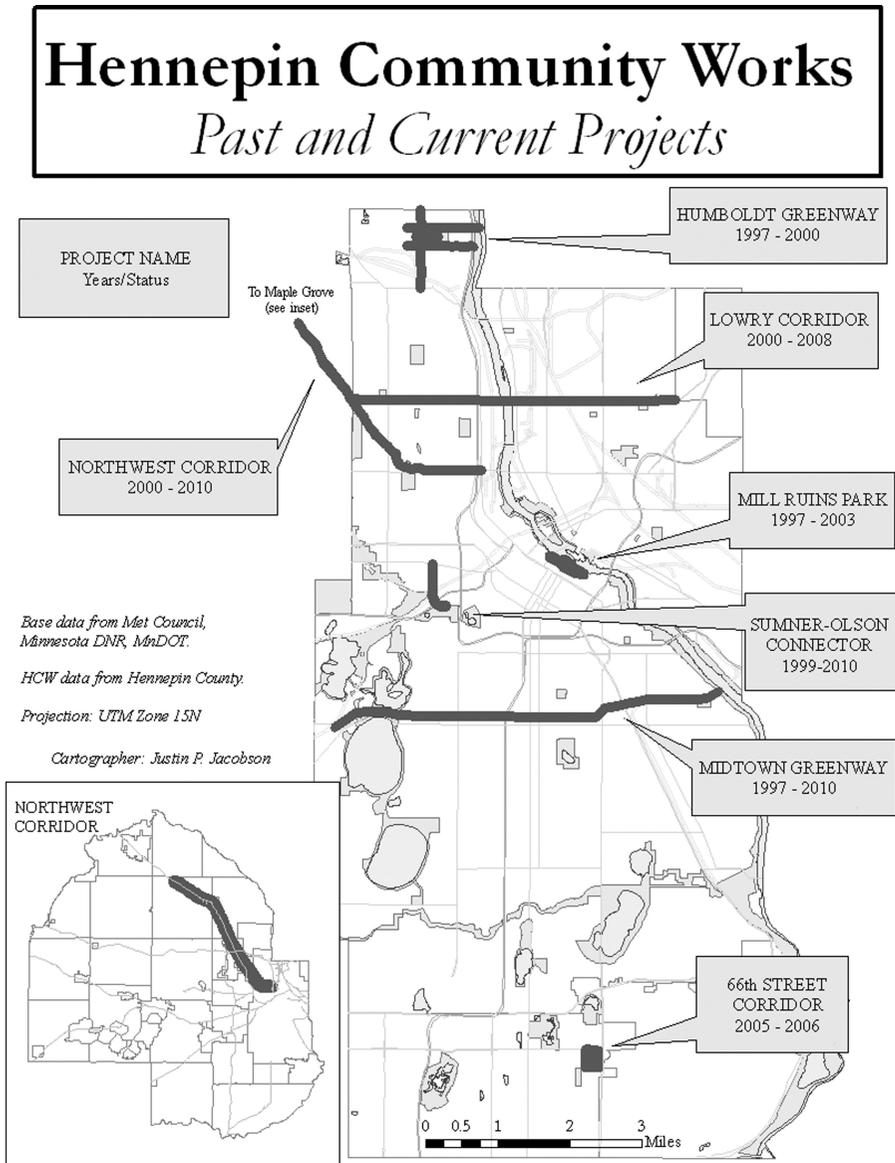


FIGURE 1
Hennepin Community Works, Past and Current Projects

that might assist the area’s revitalization (Figure 2). Third, as Humboldt Avenue already connected the northern suburbs and central Minneapolis, an improved roadway would make the area more convenient both for local residents and for through traffic (Hennepin Community Works, n.d.).

The early years of the project saw HCW partner with the City of Minneapolis’s development agency (MCDA) to purchase 216 properties in the area, including 146 residential properties with an average value of \$65,415. Construction of a nine-block parkway along Humboldt Avenue, a four-block parkway running along Shingle Creek, and a park connecting two local schools and a community center, cost \$6 million and was completed in 2001 (Hennepin County Office of

TABLE 1

HCW Projects

Project name	Duration	Budget
Humboldt Avenue Greenway	1997–2000	\$28,850,000
29th Street Corridor*	1997–2006	\$8,945,678
Midtown Community Works*	1998–2008	\$15,250,000
Mill Ruins Park	1998–2003	\$1,600,000
Sumner-Olson Connector	1999–2007	\$7,938,000
Lowry Avenue Corridor	2000–2012	\$34,141,757
Northwest Corridor	2000–2010	\$11,997,000
Affordable Housing	2000–2008	\$35,400,000
Hiawatha Crossing*	2002–2007	\$5,325,000
Transit Oriented Development	2003–2008	\$12,000,000
66th Street Corridor	2005–2010	\$7,200,000
Grand Rounds Parkway	2005–2006	\$200,000
Day-Lighting of County Creeks	2005–2009	\$1,500,000
Brooklyn Park Stable Neighborhoods	2005–2006	\$4,000,000
Corridor Planning	2006–2012	\$1,600,000
Federal Lands Acquisition	2006–2007	\$400,000
Shady Oak Corridor	2006–2008	\$3,150,000
Victory Memorial Drive	2007–2010	\$3,500,000
Minnehaha–Hiawatha	2007–2012	\$10,500,000
Total		\$197,497,484

Budgeted, on-going projects shaded.

*These three projects form the Midtown Greenway.

Source: Hennepin County Office of Budget & Finance, 1997–2006.

Budget & Finance, 2000, 2001). With the dilapidated properties cleared and the parkway in place, HCW stepped away from direct management and the city took the lead in the reconstruction of the neighborhood. While construction continues, 269 housing units of varied types (single family, town homes, and senior rentals) have been built, with 61 units classified as affordable. The average price for the remaining market-rate single-family housing was \$251,000. The total cost for the project was \$28,850,000. Importantly, the project stayed within budget and has paid for itself. By early 2007, 90% of the housing units had sold and assessed values of nearby properties had also increased (Humboldt Greenway, 2007).

Infrastructure investments have made a positive impact on the area's livability (Buchta, 2002). The residential revitalization sparked some commercial investment, increasing local access to supermarkets, stores, and restaurants. The rehabilitation of Shingle Creek allowed passage to a park along the Mississippi, and the construction of new park space increased recreational opportunities in this previously under-served area (Blanchette, 2006). Humboldt Greenway is an object of great pride for HCW officials and best demonstrates HCW's commitment to improving housing in the county.

HCW's second major effort, the Midtown Greenway, highlighted HCW's transportation focus. This project transformed a derelict freight rail corridor into a pedestrian and bike greenway. Construction began in 1997 and completed in 2007. The Midtown Greenway stretches from the lakes area along the western edge of Minneapolis to the Mississippi River on the eastern edge (see Figure 1). Along the way, the trail connects with three north-south bike trails, enhancing both commuting and recreational cycling. The corridor's makeover also allows for a potential future light rail line adjacent to the bike and pedestrian paths (Brandt, 1998, 2000). This corridor's physical rehabilitation cost (\$15,250,000 as of the 2008 budget) was supplemented by two

affiliated projects that pushed the total cost to \$29.5 million (Hennepin County Office of Budget & Finance, 2006). The first affiliated project created Midtown Community Works to stimulate private investment along the corridor. This subsidiary focused on land assembly and on purchasing incompatible uses, such as an unused grain elevator, to create attractive parcels for residential and commercial development. The second affiliated project was the recently completed construction of the Midtown Greenway's pedestrian/bike bridge over Hiawatha Avenue, and the four-year-old light rail line located there. HCW funds helped reconfigure the traffic pattern at this busy intersection, and in the process added a spectacular new landmark in South Minneapolis.

HCW's strategy of public infrastructure investment to spur private investment appears to have paid off. Parcel assembly and new transportation connections have made several sections of this corridor more attractive to developers. The most notable project is the Midtown Exchange at the Lake and Chicago intersection, which opened in June 2006. After sitting unused for over a decade, the former Sears store site became a mixed-use development with the Allina Corporation headquarters, a six-story hotel, the city's largest indoor public market, 219 rental units, and 140 condominiums/town homes for sale (52 of these are affordable units). Another Midtown Community Works project is the "Urban Village," between Aldrich and Dupont on the Greenway, which combines 192 residential units and some small commercial development on abandoned industrial land.

In these two projects, HCW took the lead in a major effort involving countless stakeholders. HCW has also sometimes performed an auxiliary role, as in the Sumner–Olson Redevelopment Project. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development provided \$74 million to demolish 770 substandard public housing units and reconstruct a mixed-income neighborhood with ample low-cost housing in its place. HCW assisted this project by improving its roadway connections, as the site was long severed from the rest of Minneapolis by a railroad corridor and an interstate highway. HCW constructed a bridge and a new street, Van White Boulevard, to connect South Minneapolis to the now-renamed Heritage Park, at a final cost of \$7.9 million (Hennepin County Office of Budget & Finance, 2005).

Transformation of physical infrastructure has not been limited to the City of Minneapolis. The Northwest Corridor project has a clear suburban focus and will eventually improve the commute from the northwestern suburbs along County Road 81 into the city (Blake, 2002). HCW money will upgrade the county road to handle greater traffic counts, thereby easing congestion along the roughly parallel Interstate 94. At the same time, plans provide for a dedicated Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) lane. To make the BRT even more effective, planners have promoted TOD principles for particular nodes along the route, including the reorientation of suburban "downtown" Osseo to take advantage of the improved transit access. This project is expected to be finished in 2008, with a projected final cost of \$12.5 million (Hennepin County Office of Budget & Finance, 2006).

Transportation-based projects have clearly been HCW's primary focus, but the development of green space is a significant secondary arena. The Mill Ruins Park project in the heart of Minneapolis' central riverfront combined a \$1.6 million commitment from HCW with \$23 million from other sources to transform a national landmark, the Washburn-Crosby Mill, into an interpretive center and outdoor museum. The Mill City Museum is now one of Minneapolis's premier tourist destinations. Another set of park projects included the rehabilitation of three small creeks in the county. To date, \$400,000 has been budgeted to improve drainage and storm-water management and to make creeks more accessible for recreation.

A NEW DEFINITION OF COUNTY RESPONSIBILITY

What can be learned from the HCW experience? One cannot say with certainty that none of these projects would have happened without HCW being created, because road and park

maintenance remain typical county responsibilities. But it is quite likely that the shape, scale, and number of projects would qualitatively differ, and that the total impact would be less significant. It is certain that, for Minneapolis, the absence of HCW would mean much more “ordinary” street rebuilding, without a strong connection to complementary economic development goals. HCW has been instrumental in developing a multigovernmental, multifaceted approach to urban development for two specific reasons. First, in initiating and implementing projects, it provides both fiscal and political leadership for what had formerly been a fairly complicated relationship. HCW fulfills the important role of providing seed money and laying out ambitious agenda, which can then be expanded and modified by governmental partners who cannot launch such ambitious projects alone. Second, its political structure is based on partnerships, allowing different units of government to come together to develop projects with broad appeal. At the same time, HCW does not dominate these processes and override weaker partners, but allows for an important degree of local control.

The “on the ground” impacts of this process have been an improvement over what any government unit, working alone, might have accomplished. Without HCW, for example, Humboldt Avenue would have been maintained, but not have been rebuilt as the catalyst for the entire neighborhood’s improvement. The Minneapolis development agency might have undertaken a small-scale housing rehabilitation project, but would likely not have connected it to larger improvements, or produced any ancillary development. The widened sidewalks, landscaping, and street furniture that characterize Franklin Avenue and other recently rebuilt city streets—all also county roads—would not exist. HCW has thus transformed the meaning and expectations of public works in Minneapolis and Hennepin County. Questions about public works improvements are now explicit: how might future projects add to the local quality of life, and how might they be connected to other initiatives to promote new development possibilities. Such questions are not the usual purview of public works or of county government. HCW thus stands in stark contrast to the more typical models of county governance mentioned above. It has acquired a reputation for political leadership in metropolitan development, and not just for administration. Nearby Ramsey County, for example, has nothing resembling HCW, despite being well aware of these efforts and their impacts. Ramsey is a far less prosperous county, with a smaller downtown commercial tax base, and fewer wealthy suburbs with their own strong commercial bases.

What other lessons can be drawn from the HCW experience? While Hennepin County is large and financially powerful on its own, there is added power in multiplying county resources with those of the city and others. Just as HCW’s contribution has been invaluable for smaller partner governments, HCW has at times been a minor but still important partner. For example, HCW contributed just \$1.6 million to the \$23 million Mill Ruins Park project. But this modest contribution crucially provided part of the mandatory local match that made state bonding money available.

Another lesson may be that expanding programs to require partnerships is slow work. Hennepin County decisions normally turn on seven votes, but working with and through other jurisdictions multiplies voices at the table and can be frustrating. Larry Blackstad, the former HCW director for the county, noted that years of his recent working life were spent in late night neighborhood meetings—not the normal province of county public works’ staff (Blackstad, 2006). The county now finds its imprint on big and complex projects. Many HCW projects have found favor among local residents, who may know little about HCW or the county, but appreciate the bike trails, open creeks, or Midtown’s Global Market.

Now in its second decade, HCW’s approach is broadening. Early projects were geographically defined by Humboldt Avenue or the 29th Street rail corridor, for example. But HCW has also provided funding for two initiatives (affordable housing and TOD) that will extend its impacts into many parts of the county. In 2000, HCW committed \$35 million (through 2008) for affordable

Hennepin Community Works *Future Projects*

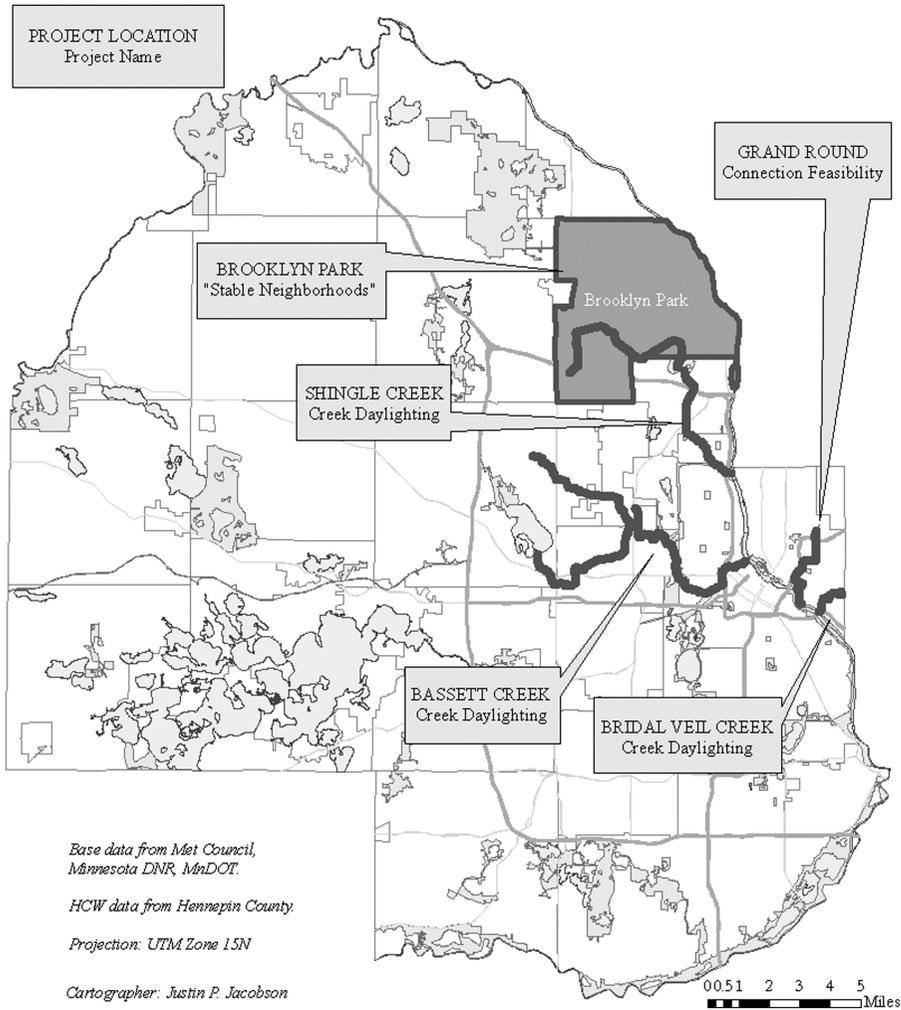


FIGURE 2
Hennepin Community Works, Future Projects

housing initiatives (Figure 2). Some geographically specific housing investments will connect to larger redevelopment efforts, but the focus of this program is to improve housing options broadly throughout the county. In 2003, HCW provided \$10 million for countywide TOD projects, such as the one noted earlier in Osseo, and has recently committed \$2 million more to this. Clearly, the early focus on improving Minneapolis has not stopped, but several recently announced projects address more suburban and exurban portions of the county. The Shady Oak Corridor, launched in 2006, will upgrade a county road that connects two western suburbs, while simultaneously

protecting nearby wetlands, improving mass transit connections and creating affordable housing opportunities. Meanwhile, HCW remains interested in pursuing possible sites to replicate projects like the Humboldt Greenway or the 29th Street Corridor, and has allocated \$250,000 per year through 2012 for Corridor Planning feasibility studies (Hennepin County Office of Budget & Finance, 2006).

What can other counties, cities, and other stakeholders in metropolitan development learn from HCW? Other metropolitan areas might well attend to HCW's example, as the expansion of already existing county government structures is considerably easier than the formation of a new layer of government. HCW built upon programs that were already in place but underutilized, rather than seeking a more radical change, such as regional government or city-county consolidation. Either of those alternatives may have potential beyond the HCW model, but they are also considerably more difficult to implement. In addition, regional government and city-county consolidation both evoke protest among some residents and policymakers who worry about a loss of local control. Such concerns have not been part of HCW's experience, as its cooperative process only allows for change when local stakeholders agree.

There is much about HCW to recommend for other metro areas, though clearly, not every American county could match its base of financial resources. Duplicating HCW's process and success would appear to be limited to large counties with a mix of urban and suburban municipalities and a fairly broad tax base. HCW drew upon Hennepin County's prosperity to launch its projects, and not all counties have such resources. Replicating this process obviously depends at least in part on available resources.

Hennepin County's financial abilities are certainly not unique for the United States. Were financial resources or political conditions the two fundamental causes for HCW's creation, we would expect HCW to be merely one among several community works programs across the country. Adjacent Ramsey County, for example, though smaller and less prosperous than Hennepin, still resembles Hennepin in many ways: in its relationship to the state, and in its mix of declining urban and more prosperous suburban municipalities. Yet Ramsey County has nothing similar to HCW, no matter the scale.

Thus, the fundamental reasons behind HCW's development would seem to be specific political choices rather than circumstantial conditions: a willingness to intervene in city-suburban resource imbalances as well as the recognition that county-level interventions could address such gaps. Generally, the deteriorating conditions of central cities have been viewed as demanding either a federal government or a local government solution, and the county—that “dark continent of American politics”—is typically never considered as a resource. HCW shows that the county, building upon already existing powers and capabilities, does have a role to play in urban development efforts. Counties can use traditional functions such as road reconstruction or environmental management to further broader metropolitan goals as well as provide a leadership role for inter-governmental cooperation. Counties cannot replace the federal government or local government in contributing to or directing urban development, nor would we argue that they should. They can, however, richly supplement such efforts, by taking the lead in instigating and funding local projects that no longer receive federal attention, and supporting regional projects beyond any single municipality's scope.

HCW does not fit usual urban development models nor does it fit the usual models of county government. It does, however, show that counties can manage a larger role in city redevelopment and in metropolitan governance than they have typically taken on, and that such roles can be both significant and appropriate. HCW projects demonstrate the enormous potential that lies hidden within quite ordinary infrastructure improvements. For example, most cities and counties repave streets and bridges in a somewhat regular cycle, unconnected to any other political issues that might be brewing. Often such work is simply a regularly budgeted aspect of city and county business.

To reframe a regular responsibility, such as street repaving, and define its potential to affect larger landscape/societal transformations, is a true departure from the usual path of administrative life. But exactly this sort of seemingly modest administrative adjustment exists almost everywhere, if imagination and political will can be corralled toward this end. Though limited to Hennepin County, HCW provides an undeniable model for counties nationwide to consider using their infrastructure resources more creatively, and to better advantage for their citizenry.

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