

# REGIONAL CITIZEN ACTION

## New England's InterValley Project advances the cutting edge of democratic economic development

KEN GALDSTON

The InterValley Project (IVP) is a network created by the leaders and staff of four citizen action organizations in Southern New England, all of which combine organizing and democratic economic development as their basic model. The four groups are the Naugatuck Valley Project (NVP) based in Waterbury, Connecticut, the Merrimack Valley Project (MVP) and the Pioneer Valley Project (PVP), based respectively in Lawrence and Springfield, Massachusetts, and the Rhode Island Organizing Project (RIOP), headquartered in Providence. NVP is now 14 years old, MVP eight, RIOP five, and PVP two years old.

IVP groups are regional citizen action organizations made up of religious congregations, labor union locals, tenant, community, and small business groups. They are multi-issue, broad-based, and focus on the leadership development of members of their member groups. They mobilize hundreds of people for public action on issues that arise from their membership - including job, housing, schools, public service, and environmental concerns. They also use democratic economic development strategies to save and create jobs and affordable housing.

Six years ago we described our work in *Making Waves* (Vol. 2, No. 3, pp. 1-3) and presented the lessons we had learned in combining organizing and development strategies in the NVP and MVP. This article is both an update to that report and a reflection on the validity of the conclusions it drew.

### NEW DEVELOPMENTS

In some ways, the formation of the IVP as a self-governing network with a full-time director/organizer, may be the most important change for the long-term success and stability of our work.

It allows us to focus on supporting the work of the individual member groups, and to bring them together in a consistent way to learn from each other, replicate the best in each other's work, and to unite for common action.

It also allows us to work in an organized way with other similar community organizations on regional issues that affect all of southern New England, and to spend serious time identifying and learning from

other groups across the U.S. and in other parts of the world.

On the democratic economic development side, since our last report IVP groups have added a second employee-owned home health care company (Valley Home Care in Lowell, Massachusetts) to Valley Care Cooperative in Waterbury, Connecticut; a second large resident-owned and democratically-controlled affordable housing development (Amesbury Gardens in Lawrence, Massachusetts) to Brookside Cooperative Housing in Water-

bury; and, potentially, a fourth successful employee buy-out through a current union and community campaign at Prince Pasta Company in Lowell, which is presently owned by Borden's.

We have also begun to return to the question of how best do we organize members of our member groups as bank depositors, insurance policy holders, corporate stockholders, and consumers, to use the power of money as well as the power of numbers to shape the policies of banks, insurance companies, and other corporations on issues

ranging from job creation to the quality of health care provision. Along these lines we are also very interested in exploring the potential for developing a labour-related

*Development work must be driven by an organizing group that is committed to change & will fight for it. This will lead to new economic entities more clearly owned & shaped by those who will work or live there & benefit from it.*

investment fund, such as the Crocus Fund in Manitoba.

**THE LESSONS LEARNED**

In July 1991 we reported five fundamental lessons we had learned from eight years of organizing and developing worker-owned companies and co-operative housing and a community land trust:

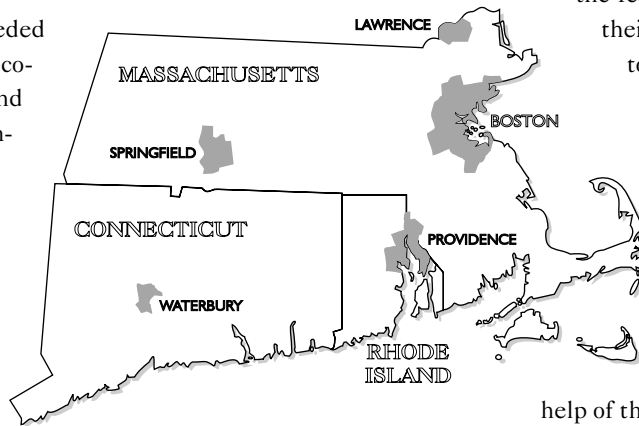
- Organizations trying to combine organizing and economic development work must first decide which of these two activities defines their primary identity. From our experience economic development work best grows out of the power base of a successful citizen action organization.
- Development work must be preceded by a clear power analysis of the economic and political dynamics and institutions which shape the communities in which we work.
- Development work must be driven and led by an existing or readily-formed organizing group which is committed to change and will fight for it. This will lead to new economic entities more clearly owned and shaped by the vision of those who will work or live there and benefit from it.
- Democratic ownership models (worker-owned companies, resident-owned housing) are the best for linking new economic entities with on-going democratically-controlled citizens action organizations.
- The citizen action organization needs to continue to organize with the new democratic entities around issues that affect their members as citizens, residents, consumers, and as workers, for the well-being of the people and the economic entities they have created as well.

Seven years later these same basic principles, reinforced by additional experience, are still guiding us.

**THE LESSONS AT WORK**

A recent MVP campaign underscores these lessons. With the strong organizing support of the MVP, residents of Amesbury Gardens, a 165-unit privately owned affordable housing development in the Plains neighborhood of Lawrence, Massachusetts, became the owners of their complex.

MVP learned in 1992 that this development was about to be placed on the market by its owner, a major commercial and residential developer based in Boston. MVP also knew that because Ames-



bury Gardens had been built in the early 1970s with U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) funds, federal law required that the tenants be given the first opportunity to bid on the property. At the time, however, no tenant association existed, in part because of tenant fear.

The residents were elderly people for the most part, many of whom had lived in single and 2-family houses in the Plains neighbourhood when Urban Renewal destroyed their homes in the late 1960s. They moved to Amesbury Gardens when it opened as a way to maintain their ties with the neighbourhood and each other.

When individual contact with tenants about forming a tenants association to

protect their rights met with failure, MVP was able to organize tenants through three MVP member Catholic churches, a number of whose parishioners lived at Amesbury Gardens. Pastors wrote a joint letter to their parishioners inviting them to an educational meeting on MVP and the future of their development to be held in St. Anthony Maronite Church.

At the meeting the pastors and MVP leaders and staff made a presentation about the likelihood of the landlord selling Amesbury Gardens, and about how the tenants, if organized, and with the backing of a group like the MVP, could hire technical assistance groups to study the feasibility of becoming owners of their housing, and, if feasible, go on to become owners.

Leaders emerged at the first meeting who took responsibility for organizing subsequent meetings with other resident-owners in the Boston area, who themselves were able to tell their story of success.

With the organizing help of the MVP, a strong Amesbury Gardens Tenants Association (AGTA) was formed, and excellent technical assistance providers were hired. AGTA joined the MVP, and AGTA and the MVP waged a long battle to gain local, state, and federal political support for the buy-out.

Although the tenants were buying the property under HUD guidelines and with HUD loans, their battle took place just as the Republicans took control of the U.S. Congress and began to cut back HUD programs. While the Democratic congressperson representing Lawrence strongly supported the buy-out, it soon became critical to gain Republican congressional support as well to preserve AGTA's buy-out campaign.

Because MVP is a regional organization and happens to include portions of two congressional districts, MVP member



**KEN GALDSTON** is director of the InterValley Project. Contact him at (tel/fax) 617-324-1585 and (e-mail) mvalley@aol.com. Reach the Merri-

mack Valley Project in Lawrence, Massachusetts at (tel) 508-686-0650, the Naugatuck Valley Project in Waterbury, Connecticut at 203-574-2410, the Pioneer Valley Project in Springfield, Massachusetts at 413-827-0781, and the Rhode Island Organizing Project in Providence, Rhode Island at 401-351-5577.

groups - churches and labor union locals - outside of Lawrence in the second congressional district were able to gain the support of their Republican representative for AGTA's campaign. This made the essential difference in the AGTA buy-out effort surviving HUD cutbacks.

When the buy-out was completed this past spring and residents became owners of their housing through their membership in the AGTA, it was a result of their having led their own fight and the strong backing of the MVP.

In the course of this campaign, through hours of committee meetings and work with technical assistance providers, residents had also designed and overseen the rehabilitation of their housing and the construction of a wonderful new community centre.

AGTA has also been an excellent MVP member group, sending a score of leaders over the past several years to MVP and IVP Leadership Institutes, and turning out scores of people for MVP actions on a variety of issues, some of which affect them directly and some of which they have responded to on a mutual support basis.

Dot Chretien, AGTA's president, has served on the MVP executive council for

four years and has offered excellent leadership skills there. By the same token, her involvement with MVP as a leader and her participation in MVP and IVP Leadership Institutes have enabled her to do a better job as AGTA president.

With the transfer of ownership, MVP will continue to offer AGTA organizing support, leadership training, links to other democratically-owned housing in the IVP network, and access to technical assistance providers.

Just as important, membership and participation in MVP will give AGTA a way to organize with others to have a powerful voice on issues that affect its members as citizens, taxpayers, residents, consumers, and workers, as well as to look out for its own interests when dealing with other institutions on decision affecting it as a housing development.

We see the following lessons played out in the AGTA campaign:

- MVP's power as a membership citizen action organization was critical to the success of the buy-out, both in forming the tenants association and when it came to dealing with the larger political forces which threatened financing for the deal.
- MVP's power analysis allowed it to recognize that Amesbury Gardens would be coming up to sale and to analyze which players we wanted on our side in this campaign.
- The Amesbury Gardens buy-out was driven by Amesbury Gardens tenants and their vision has shaped its re-development, thus increasing their psychological ownership.
- Democratic ownership of the complex through AGTA as a resident association increases the odds that this will remain a community resource for years to come, and provides a good fit for mutual reinforcement with MVP, a democratically-controlled organization.
- AGTA as an MVP member group takes action on broader community issues

which affect its members and potentially its own well-being. (Organizing for adequate fire protection to prevent arson in the Plains neighbourhood is an example of this.) This strengthens both organizations and, therefore, both organizing and democratic economic development.

### THE FUTURE

On the organizing front we have begun conversations with other organizing networks in New England about common issue campaigns and joint activity to identify and train organizers.

In our democratic economic development work we continue to learn from others and develop broader and more sophisticated strategies for saving and creating jobs and affordable housing. Our recent job organizing, for example, has expanded to include sectoral strategies - doing regional strategic planning, forming co-operative industrial networks, helping create an industrial extension service with local universities - and organizing for brownfield redevelopment.

As part of our creation of two employee-owned home health care companies we are exploring linking with Home Care Associates Training Institute, the nonprofit arm of Cooperative Home Care Associates in the South Bronx, to form a network of five such companies on the east coast for resource development and business links.

Six years later, while growing as individual organizations and as a network, the lessons we drew from our work remain the same. Others in the community organizing movement have begun to join us in working to link organizing and development.

We look forward to working with them and with others on this critical goal. We think it is crucial to helping us gain the power to have the broad impact we need on the issues affecting the poor and working poor in North America.☞