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Approved by the
Citizens League Board of Directors
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Statement by the Citizens League on Cooperative Housing/Neighborhood Maintenance and Operation

A proposal that residents of neighborhoods in the Twin Cities area should act cooperatively in the maintenance and operation of their homes and neighborhoods now is an established—although not widespread—practice in some locations.

In a report issued seven years ago, the Citizens League argued that residents could obtain higher quality services at lower prices by working together as a group rather than working separately as individual households. The CL said cooperative action would enhance the longer term stability of neighborhoods. For example, if four households on a block plan to install insulation in their attics, they might get a better price if they hire the same contractor to do the work as one job instead of four separate jobs. At the same time, they might stimulate more of their neighbors to undertake such improvements. In effect, today's urban residents can help each other just as pioneers helped raise each other's barns and as farmers helped harvest each other's fields. In a more formal sense there are other parallels with agriculture. Minnesota has been a leader in the establishment of rural co-operatives. Perhaps the state could also be a leader in development of urban equivalents of the rural co-ops.

The first steps in implementing the Citizens League proposal have been carried out. First some experiments were undertaken in a few neighborhoods to see if the idea worked. It did. People saved money by working together. In one neighborhood the program now is in its sixth year. Aided by a foundation grant, booklets were prepared which outlined the steps that residents might take within neighborhoods. Scientific surveys were taken of attitudes of residents toward making housing improvements.

So far the idea has spread slowly, mainly by word of mouth. A more ambitious effort is needed now, because of (a) growing household expense, such as for energy-related improvements, meaning that housing expense may take a larger chunk of the family budget; (b) growing

importance of preserving the existing stock of housing; and (c) growing recognition that residents themselves, not government, have, and want, the central responsibility for maintaining and operating their own housing.

In our report seven years ago we stressed that cooperative neighborhood maintenance and operation has more impact and is more likely to succeed if it is:

- *Voluntary* on the part of residents; *not mandatory*, imposed by someone else.
- *Private; not governmental*
- *Decentralized*, involving many small groups, each covering only a few blocks of homes; *not centralized*, where only one or a few large groups would be organized.
- *Business-oriented*, serving the enlightened self-interests of residents who are seeking the best service possible at the lowest price possible; *not politically-oriented*, trying to affect decisions of government and other outside groups which have impact on the neighborhood.

Our task force spent several meetings reviewing developments in recent years in cooperative maintenance and operation of housing. We believe the above-stated principles remain valid today. In addition, we identified some ways in which we believe the concept can be extended:

- Initially, the Citizens League report stressed first priority on *convincing neighborhood residents*. The emphasis should be expanded now to *convincing businesses* which supply goods and services used by homeowners. For example, an insulation contractor who promises a discount when several residents on a block purchase jointly has the opportunity for greater volume of business. There is some evidence that busi-

nesses already are taking the initiative. We learned that one large firm is interested in obtaining a contract to weatherize up to 1,000 homes, with payments to come from energy savings realized by the residents.

- Initially, we felt that *only neighborhoods with active homeowners' associations* should be approached. Now we believe the concept is applicable in *all types of neighborhoods*. Some persons argue that involvement in an association, where homeowners are expected to attend "meetings" may be a deterrent to some residents becoming involved in joint maintenance/operation.
- Initially, most of the interest came from *central city neighborhoods*. But advantages of cooperative activity apply in *all neighborhoods, city or suburban*.
- Initially, we thought of *neighborhood leaders* as being the main audience, with the expectation that they would carry the word back to their residents. Now we believe *direct contact* must be made *with individuals* in neighborhoods who are known to be thinking about home maintenance improvements.
- Initially, we stressed the advantage of cooperative *buying* of household services. We now see considerable potential, too, for cooperative *selling*. A neighborhood may have many marketable products about which its residents are unaware. For example, neighborhood residents might sell meter-reading, periodical distribution, and real estate listings. One particularly timely product a neighborhood might offer for sale is the labor of its residents to conduct energy audits of homes. Neighbors are more likely to be admitted to a home to conduct an audit than strangers would be.
- Initially, we stressed that neighborhood residents would *buy services* provided by someone else. Now, we see potential, too, for these residents to *buy*, cooperatively, "*know-how*"—that is, residents may find real savings in performing services for themselves, voluntarily, provided that they can acquire the necessary skills. Thus they might buy skill-training jointly, perhaps from selected retired neighbors, or they might exchange skills with each other. A neighborhood skills "tank" could be set up, listing the talents of participants. A resident might paint a neighbor's living room in exchange for the neighbor's helping with gardening or yard work.
- Another area where sharing may have considerable potential is in transportation. The neighborhood could *coordinate ride-sharing* for its residents. While employers are becoming increasingly involved in coordinating

ride-sharing for work trips, the neighborhood can be an important tool for coordinating non-work trips, which represent more than one-half of all trips each day.

We found it very difficult to devise a strategy for extending the cooperative maintenance/operation concept. The reason is that successful implementation requires voluntary action in thousands of different situations by thousands of different householders. It isn't possible to accomplish implementation through a law passed by the Legislature, a regulation passed by an administrative agency, or an ordinance passed by a city council. Such actions, while they may be helpful are only supplementary.

This subject is a good example of the kind of issue that may arise with greater frequency in the Citizens League in coming years, particularly for those issues where government is not an appropriate vehicle for solutions.

As we considered how the concept of cooperative maintenance/operation could best be implemented in the metropolitan area, we settled on a strategy of education, which, of course, really is the job of the Citizens League. Hard-sell techniques aren't likely to be effective. The individuals, businesses and other participants must come to their own conclusions that the cooperative approach needs to be pursued.

Our job for this statement, focused on *how and to whom* the education effort would be directed, and *by whom* it would be conducted. We developed three major recommendations:

1. Reach individuals through community education.

We were attracted to the highly popular community education classes which residents now take voluntarily, often in their own neighborhood school buildings, at night. They are anxious to learn "how-to"—how to lay carpeting, how to build your own rec-room, how to maintain your lawn. They willingly pay tuition for these classes. We conducted an informal survey which indicated that home improvement classes are offered in school districts throughout the Twin Cities metropolitan area. An emphasis on the cooperative approach to maintenance and operation of single family neighborhoods seems to be a logical component of these types of classes.

We recommend that community education directors in school districts throughout the metropolitan area add new classes, or additional dimensions to existing classes, which are designed to explain how residents of a neighborhood, by cooperative action, can obtain better services for less

money, and help upgrade their neighborhood at the same time.

Our informal survey of community school directors indicated that a major obstacle may be lack of available instructors for such classes. We believe several options exist:

- One possibility is leaders from neighborhoods with successful experiments, such as the Lexington-Hamline community in Saint Paul, which has had the most experience and success with cooperative maintenance/operations. Because community education instructors are paid, this option could be a revenue-producer for a neighborhood association.
- Another possibility is to seek instructors from among various firms which provide supplies or services for neighborhood maintenance. For example, someone from a firm which deals in lawn care might be able to provide first-hand advice on how residents might organize themselves jointly and what kinds of savings they might expect.
- Another possibility is that county extension service personnel might take the initiative.
- Another possibility is that persons active in maintenance/operations of townhouses and condominiums could share their expertise.

2. Undertake a new effort to reach providers of neighborhood services.

We believe that businesses which now sell supplies and services to households, one-by-one, can reap benefits for neighborhoods and for themselves by marketing their products to groups of households as a unit. They can operate more efficiently; they can have the potential of

stimulating more households to participate; and they can produce cost savings for their customers.

We recommend that associations which represent the various firms that provide services to households begin now to urge the firms to take a neighborhood approach to marketing. This might be particularly attractive to firms that provide construction materials and services, and, more specifically, materials and services in the energy conservation area.

Some businesses actually may *need* the cooperation of neighborhood residents to carry out their work effectively. As mentioned earlier in this statement, a firm is more likely to succeed in convincing residents to open their homes for energy audits if the persons coming into the homes to do the work are also residents of the neighborhood.

3. Organize a broad-based effort.

Many different individuals, organizations and businesses are affected in various ways by the cooperative neighborhood maintenance/operation concept. The level of understanding of the concept is not yet widespread. It will take time and patience.

As a way to begin to get broader public attention and to enable more ongoing education, we recommend that a foundation or an association of firms involved in home improvements sponsor a major public educational meeting or conference in the Twin Cities metropolitan area, with the intent of attracting as large and diverse a group of participants as possible. In addition, to assure continued follow-up, we recommend that an audio-visual presentation should be designed to convey the cooperative maintenance/operation concept as clearly and as completely as possible.

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Members of the Housing Task Force, which prepared this statement, were Mary Rollwagen, chairman; Gary Dodge, Dennis Dorgan, James Hammill, Donald Jacobson, Charles Lutz, Phillip Roe, Imogene Treichel and Alan Wilensky.

The task force was formed in the fall of 1979, with a general charge from the Citizens League Board of Directors to explore previous reports by the Citizens League in the housing area, to see where additional work might assist in the implementation of CL recommendations.

The task force decided to focus on the report, "Building Confidence in Older Neighborhoods," issued in June 1973, which contained the League's initial recommendation for cooperative maintenance of housing. To gain first-hand knowledge of some of the developments since then, the task force held a special meeting in the Lexington-Hamline neighborhood of Saint Paul, where such activity may be more advanced than any other neighborhood in the Twin Cities metropolitan area. The task force consulted with representatives of other neighborhoods

where the concept has not been tried. The task force reviewed the results of a foundation-backed effort in the Citizens League in 1974-75, to prepare guidelines for neighborhoods thinking about joint contraction, and the results of surveys conducted by Public Service Options, a Citizens League-sponsored organization—no longer functioning— which explored the joint contracting approach.

It then developed a list of possible recommendations, after which a general strategy was agreed upon, and this statement was drafted.

A limited number of copies of the report "Building Confidence in Older Neighborhoods" are available at the Citizens League office.