

North Carolina Takes the Reins

“Small Cities” Community Development Block Grants

by Harriet Kestenbaum and John Downs

Three years ago Sawyer Town, a neighborhood in Elizabeth City, was not a particularly nice place to take a stroll on a summer evening, or any other time of the year for that matter. “I used to have to hold my nose when I walked down the street because the odor from the sewage was so foul,” remembers Dan Beideman, a Sawyer Town resident. “The sewage often leaked into the ditches and provided a breeding ground for mosquitoes,” he adds. Besides the sewage problem many of the houses were in severe disrepair. “The neighborhood looked like a big junkyard,” says Maggie Sawyer, another Sawyer Town resident.

In 1979, the neighborhood began to change. Mike Avery, the community development (C.D.) director for Elizabeth City, applied for and was awarded a three-year, \$1.5 million grant from the “Small Cities” Community Development Block Grant program (CDBG), then administered by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). With these funds, a new sewage system has been installed, sidewalks and streets have been paved, and over 130 houses have been rehabilitated.

“The neighborhood is a changed place now,” says Ms. Sawyer. “I wish we could get this project to all the neighborhoods in Elizabeth City where the people are not able to fix up their homes. I wish this could happen to every low-income family.”

This year, for the first time in the eight-year life of the CDBG program, Mike Avery and other community development directors across North Carolina did not go to HUD with their grant proposals. Instead, they applied for the federal community development funds through the N.C. Department of Natural Resources and Community Develop-

ment (NRCD), which has taken over the administration of the Small Cities CDBG program from HUD.

The Reagan administration’s “new federalism” gave the states the option to assume the administration of the Small Cities CDBG program, an option that included a great deal of flexibility in deciding how and for what purposes grants would be awarded. Gov. James B. Hunt, Jr. accepted this responsibility and assigned the Division of Community Assistance of NRCD to administer it. North Carolina gained administrative control over \$46 million in CDBG funds for federal fiscal year (FY) 1982. Among the 50 states, only Texas received a larger Small Cities CDBG allocation, and Texas did not choose to administer the program.

Since the CDBG program began in 1974, these federal funds have supported primarily housing rehabilitation and various neighborhood-related activities such as street paving, new water and sewer lines, storm sewers, clearance of slums, and relocation of families. Hence, the state has assumed a significant new role in housing rehabilitation and community revitalization. In gaining control over \$46 million, the state also gained enormous administrative flexibility, to decide how the funds will be used and to whom they will be given. The state has already developed new administrative guidelines and announced grant-application procedures.

Harriet Kestenbaum is a Raleigh free-lance writer and researcher. She has worked as a community organizer for a Community Development Block Grant project in Hillsborough. John Downs is director of planning and community development for Farmville, North Carolina.

In September, NRCDC Sec. Joseph Grimsley will award more than \$40 million to local communities.

How has the state performed in this major administrative transition, taking control over what was once a federal program? To what extent will the new Small Cities CDBG grants improve the housing resources of the state? Most importantly, perhaps, does the way in which NRCDC is administering the Small Cities CDBG program indicate a serious commitment to solving North Carolina's housing problems?

Created by Title 1 of the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974, the CDBG program has supplied multi-purpose grants to cities, counties and states for activities previously undertaken through individual grant programs. (In effect, the CDBG program is the precursor for the block-grant funding vehicle now being promoted by the Reagan administration.) The CDBG program has two different elements: the Small Cities program, which is now being administered by the state, and the Entitlement program, a kind of revenue sharing for larger cities, which will continue to be administered by HUD.¹ From 1975-1981, about 20 percent of the annual CDBG appropriation went to the Small Cities program and the rest to Entitlement cities. For fiscal year 1982, the Small Cities program received 30 percent of the \$3.46 billion appropriated by Congress for the entire CDBG program.² Since 1975, approximately 213 communities in North Carolina have received over \$457 million in Community Development Block Grants.

In North Carolina, CDBG funds have been used predominantly for housing rehabilitation, from 34-46 percent of the funds according to HUD estimates (HUD does not maintain exact records). In most cases, local officials provided direct grants to qualifying homeowners for rehabilitation. These grants covered labor and material costs and in cases where houses were not able to be repaired, paid for relocating the residents. Other methods of distributing the funds include low-interest loans, matching funds with private lending institutions, and leveraging the funds through other government programs (see page 4 for a description of such a project, the N.C. Housing Finance Agency's Home Improvement Program).

Funds have also been used to establish revolving loan funds, which can continue to help people after the initial grant is gone. In 1979, for example, the city of Wilson received a \$1.5 million multi-year CDBG grant to set up a loan fund for housing rehabilitation in a CDBG neighborhood. Residents who met the income qualifications of

the program were able to borrow up to \$15,000 at three percent and could take up to 15 years to repay the loan, a substantially longer term than most private lending institutions offered. Residents repay the principal and interest to a revolving fund which continues to supply similar loans to others in the area.

In taking over administration of the Small Cities CDBG program, North Carolina had to meet very few federal requirements. The state does have to follow the purposes and objectives of the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974: "... the primary objective of this Title is the development of viable urban communities, by providing decent housing and suitable living environment and expanding economic opportunities, principally for persons of low and moderate income."³ Low and moderate-income persons are currently defined by HUD and NRCDC as those having an annual income of \$13,950 or less for a family of four. In addition, the state must certify to HUD that it:

- engages in planning;
- provides technical assistance;
- provides a 10 percent match of its allocation from state resources; and
- consults with local officials in developing its distribution system.

To build confidence in the new state program, take advantage of local experiences, and comply with the local-participation federal requirement, Gov. Hunt directed NRCDC to work closely with the Local Government Advisory Council (LGAC) in developing the administrative procedures for the program. The LGAC, which is composed of elected officials, with the assistance of the N.C. League of Municipalities and the Association of County Commissioners, appointed an 11-member Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) to make recommendations on how the CDBG program should be structured.⁴ In just six weeks, between November of 1981 and January of 1982, the committee hammered out a proposed structure for the state's Small Cities CDBG program. It met frequently with the Division of Community Assistance Director Sandra Babb, her staff, and others to formulate categories of funding, allocation of funds among those categories, and a method of distribution.⁵

"At first I thought things had been arranged and that NRCDC wanted us to rubber stamp their program," says Ben Shivar, the city manager of Siler City, a former community development director, and a member of the TAC. "But after the first meeting I realized that the state was commit-



The rehabilitation of this older home was funded by a Community Development Block Grant.

Photos by James Giles

ted to hearing our views.”

Another C.D. director and TAC member, Lucille Yancey from Clinton, also found the give-and-take a valuable process: “The local government representatives didn’t always agree with the state. We had to settle a lot of things, but we departed as friends.”

On January 19, 1982, the TAC submitted its final recommendations on how to administer the CDBG program to the LGAC, which in turn submitted recommendations to NRCD. The NRCD staff incorporated them into their own “proposed statement” for the state program’s structure and regulations.

To conform with the state’s Administrative Procedures Act, NRCD held three public hearings on the proposed statement.⁶ About 250 people attended the hearings, mostly local government officials directly involved with the CDBG program. In addition, a wider audience commented on the CDBG program through a series of seven hearings initiated by the Governor and held across the state on all block grants. NRCD incorporated comments from both sets of hearings in a “final statement” on administering the Small Cities CDBG program, which it submitted to HUD.

By June, the first stage of the state takeover of the Small Cities CDBG program was completed: HUD approved the state’s final statement governing the distribution of the CDBG funds for the 1982 federal fiscal year. Applications for these funds had to be submitted to the Division of Community Assistance (DCA) within NRCD by July 30. During August, DCA staff began reviewing over 200 proposals for the more than \$40 million available for local communities. Grant awards are expected to be announced by the end of September and new projects to begin on October 1, 1982, the first day of the federal fiscal year. (Because of

delay by federal officials in promulgating CDBG regulations, FY 82 funds were not available until March 1982. Even though federal FY 83 will begin October 1, 1982, the state will be awarding FY 82 funds.)

Given the freedom to design its own priorities and selection system, North Carolina structured its program in a way that closely parallels the HUD program. “We wanted to examine every component of the HUD-administered program, look at all possible alternatives, before settling on any one idea,” says DCA Director Babb. “We didn’t set out to copy the HUD program or to discard it, but to be sure we put together the best program possible for North Carolina.”

The thrust of the program stayed the same, but there are a few differences which could be significant (see box on page 20). The new changes include the creation of four separate funding categories: community revitalization, economic development, development planning, and urgent needs/contingency. The bulk of the funds — no less than 74 percent — have been designated for community revitalization. Up to 20 percent of the funds could go to grants in the economic development category (if NRCD chooses to allocate less funds to this category, because of the quality of proposals received, the funds go into the community revitalization category). The state system of categories serves to highlight economic development activities. During the seven years HUD ran the program, only two economic development projects were funded in North Carolina, but both of these were “single purpose” grants. Under the old HUD system, some economic development activities could have also been funded through “comprehensive” grants. The development planning category is entirely new. Under HUD administration, sources of funds similar to the state’s

CDBG also funds the repair of water and sewer lines in neighborhoods like this one.



urgent needs/contingency category did exist. These sources were known as "imminent threat" grants and the Secretary of HUD's Discretionary Fund.

Other state innovations include a "local option" feature, which allows communities to use up to 20 percent of their grants outside of the identified program area. And the state, in its funding formula for rating grant proposals, is giving much more weight to leveraging of private or other government funds (20 percent for economic development and 10 percent for community revitalization; HUD only gave the leveraging criteria 3 percent for single purpose grants and 0 percent for comprehensive; see chart).

Finally, the state administration dropped the former HUD requirement for a Housing Assistance Plan (HAP); HUD also dropped the HAP requirement this year. In the past, HUD required a local community to survey its existing housing stock, estimate its needs, and make realistic goals for meeting those needs through CDBG as well as other federal programs and private efforts. If a community did not meet its goals outlined in one year's proposal, it could later be penalized through the "past performance" criteria in the funding formula.

No one knows how well the new North Carolina system will work. But a number of questions have surfaced through the various hearings held during the spring and through a series of interviews with local community development officials conducted for this article. Four areas of concern have emerged, as discussed below.

1. Will the program continue to serve as many low- and moderate-income persons as it has in the past? Those who fear a reduction in benefit to

persons of low and moderate incomes point to the changes made in the system of awarding points for rating grant applications. Under the HUD system, proposals were awarded points relative to the merits of other proposals and were thus rated on a "curve" system. The new state system awards points in "blocks." For example, if a community expects to benefit 80-100 percent low- and moderate-income persons, its application would receive the maximum rating of 200 points (70-80 percent, 150 points; 60-70 percent, 125 points; and 50-60, 100 points.)

"HUD encouraged you to benefit the greatest number of low- and moderate-income persons so you would be highest on the curve," explains a community development director from a rural area in eastern North Carolina. "In the new system, there is no incentive to benefit more than 80 percent low- and moderate-income persons."

2. Will the primary emphasis of the CDBG program remain housing? The state has allocated as much as 20 percent of the funds for three categories that do not have a housing emphasis (see box). This suggests to some that housing programs will not retain the same priority as before. "The state should not have included economic development. There are other programs for that. The only program for neighborhood revitalization is the CDBG," says Boyce Hudson, a C.D. director from Wilson.

However some C.D. directors believe that there should be a greater emphasis on economic development activities. "Local people believe that if people have jobs they'll be able to rehabilitate their own homes," explains Kurt Jenne, former C.D. director of Chapel Hill and now a C.D. consultant with the Institute of Government.

3. Is the state Division of Community Assistance within NRCD as qualified as HUD to run the

Administration of Small Cities Community Development Block Grant -- Old and New

	Former Federal Provisions (Fiscal Year 1981) U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)	New State Provisions (Fiscal Year 1982) N.C. Department of Natural Resources and Community Development																																																				
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Application Requirements	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Community Plan. Analysis of community development needs and comprehensive strategy to meet those needs. Project Description. Specific plans to be undertaken in local strategy to meet needs. Housing Assistance Plan (HAP). Survey of community's existing housing stock, estimate of future housing needs, and realistic goals for meeting those needs. Assurances for Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Community Plan. (same as HUD) Project Description. (same as HUD) Housing Assistance Plan. (no longer required) Assurances for Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity. (same as HUD) 																																																				

¹The former federal and the current state categories differ in design. The major HUD categories were based on the scope of the proposed projects -- i.e., single purpose or comprehensive. Both "community revitalization" and "economic development" activities -- as defined by the major state categories -- could have been included in either the "single purpose" or "comprehensive" categories as defined by HUD. The state system highlights the economic development category; the federal system allowed some economic development activities to be subsumed under "comprehensive" grants.

²The former federal provisions distinguished between "metro" and "non-metro" projects. Very few of the Small Cities grants went to "metro" areas, as defined by HUD.

Source: N.C. Department of Natural Resources and Community Development, Division of Community Assistance.

program? The DCA staff includes four former community development directors and four others who have worked in a C.D. program. In addition, the DCA has had almost four years experience administering a HUD-funded program, 107 Technical Assistance, which is designed to assist recipients of CDBG grants improve their capacity in utilizing the CDBG funds. Despite this level of expertise, many C.D. directors wonder if the DCA can absorb such a major responsibility in such a short time. "I'm concerned about how the state is approaching staffing," worries Ben Shivar. "They need more people." Boyce Hudson adds: "There are a variety of logistical problems. There's more than they can do."

4. Can the program remain insulated from political pressure? Many communities and local community development directors developed strong, positive relationships with the Greensboro HUD Area Office staff, who were well insulated from political pressures in their administration of the CDBG program. Local officials fear that politics may play a role in the administrative decision process under the state program. "The states have less resistance to political pork barrels," says Kurt Jenne. The DCA is well aware of this danger. "If this program is not administered with a high degree of integrity, the results will be disastrous," says Sandra Babb.

The CDBG program has great adaptability to local priorities and the ability to attract private funds. These characteristics make it consistent with the Reagan administration's "new federalism." Thus, the program may be expanded to take over where larger and more direct housing subsidies are being cut back. The 1982 President's Commission on Housing recommends in its report that an expanded CDBG program, which would allow funding for new construction, replace the housing programs of HUD and the FmHA, to "allow the CDBG program to become the primary vehicle for dealing with the supply of adequate housing for low-income households."

Housing is not, however, the only area where federal programs are being cut back. The dilemma facing North Carolina and other states that have taken over the Small Cities program is how to allocate a limited pot of funds among a broadening surge of underserved needs. The Appalachian Regional Commission's programs, the Economic Development Administration's programs, the Public Housing Modernization program, and various HUD programs are among the victims of federal budget cuts. And all of them have provided funds for activities which satisfy the broad federal objectives of the CDBG program.

Because of the ways in which the CDBG program fits into the Reagan administration's priorities and because of the program's ability to meet a variety of interrelated community needs, it may well become an even more important program in the future. Thus far, the state's Division of Community Assistance has developed a program consistent with the national objectives of "... viable urban communities ... decent housing ... a suitable living environment ... expanded economic opportunities ... principally for persons of low and moderate income."⁷ The general design of the state program resembles the HUD program it follows.

The state has, however, instituted some innovations, the major ones being "local option" funds, development planning grants, a set-aside for economic development projects, more emphasis on leveraging of CDBG funds, and the award of project benefit points in blocks rather than on a curve. An analysis of these innovations must await the awarding of the first round of grants to local communities. The rapid changes at the federal level make such an analysis all the more important. The state, through its administration of the Small Cities CDBG program, will indicate to what extent it is prepared to handle federal funds efficiently and fairly. And the state will show to what degree it views housing as a priority need. □

FOOTNOTES

¹Entitlement cities in North Carolina are: Asheville, Winston-Salem, High Point, Greensboro, Burlington, Charlotte, Gastonia, Concord, Salisbury, Durham, Raleigh, Fayetteville, Jacksonville, Wilmington, and Hickory.

²From 1975-1981, funds were divided between "metro" and "non-metro" categories rather than between "small cities" and "entitlement cities." Metro funds went primarily to entitlement cities, but not exclusively; some areas classified as small cities received some metro funds. The system was changed in 1982. Funds are now divided exclusively according to the two programs, small cities and entitlement cities.

³P.L. 93-383, Title I of the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974, as amended, Sec. 101(c).

⁴TAC members were: David Taylor, Tarboro town manager (now town manager of Chapel Hill); Jeanie Beal, Triangle J Council of Governments; Bill Davis, Bladen County community development director; Logan Delaney, Asheville community development director; Tyler Harris, Craven County Assistant Manager; Joel Mashburn, Henderson County Administrator; Lewis Price, Lenoir City Manager; Ben Shivar, Greenville community development director (now Siler City City Manager); Barry Webb, Mecklenburg County community development director; Dave Wilkerson, Shelby City Manager; and Lucille Yancey, Clinton community development director.

⁵Others who worked with the TAC include: Dave Reynolds, League of Municipalities; Ed Regan, Association of County Commissioners; Billy Ray Hall, NRCD Asst. Sec. for Policy Coordination; and Jack Woods, Local Government Advisory Council.

⁶The hearings were held in New Bern on April 26, Raleigh on April 28, and Morganton on April 29.

⁷P.L. 93-383, op. cit.