



Urban Renewal

BY Dan Caterinicchia
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To look at the Edgewood Terrace community in Northeast Washington, D.C., with its bright colors, extensive, ongoing construction and high-tech gloss, you would never know that less than a decade ago the same area was known as Little Beirut.

The primary economic activity thriving in the poverty-stricken neighborhood was an open-air drug market. When supplies ran low, dealers would head inside to a storage area and replenish their stock to meet demand.

Now, because of a project called EdgeNet, rooms that once held massive quantities of cocaine and heroin are supplying the neighborhood with other resources--Internet access, computers and training--that have residents excited to live there.

EdgeNet, created by the Community Preservation and Development Corp. (CPDC) with financial help from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, has made Edgewood one of the most technologically connected communities in the region.

The neighborhood hosts five computer labs, or network learning centers, four of which offer classes for residents to gain computer knowledge, skills certification and job placement opportunities, and a fifth that serves as a college and career resource center. In October, Edgewood began to roll out low-cost desktop computers to more than 300 network-ready apartments.

In a community where residents' incomes range from below the poverty line to 80 percent of the median U.S. income, EdgeNet will help bridge the technological gap that divides income brackets. It also will provide information about jobs and have social and communal benefits.

"People will make friends and connections...and these are skills they can teach," said John Zoltner, manager of community technology at Edgewood.

EdgeNet employs Microsoft Corp. Windows-based thin-client terminals, provided at a discount rate by Netier Technologies Inc., Carrollton, Texas, to give Edgewood residents and learning centers network access. Seven Windows NT-based servers from Westborough, Mass.-based Data General Corp. serve as the network's backbone.

Thin-client terminals--which are low-end desktops designed to access applications and data over a network--were not originally part of the EdgeNet plan. But the terminals, which are still gaining

popularity in the public and private sector, turned out to be the best way for the community to meet its information technology needs.

"Originally, the goal was to use existing technology better, but we couldn't maintain all the PCs," said Knox McIlwain, manager of technology development at CPDC. "We decided on thin clients before the industry really took off, and we fired three consultants because they said we couldn't do it."

As part of EdgeNet, residents have access to software from SiteScape Inc. that facilitates online community discussions and postings within Edgewood Terrace (see "A Community Forum"). None of those technological services and applications would have been possible had it not been for a fed-up residents association seeking help in 1991 from CPDC, a nonprofit organization that helps communities provide affordable housing to low- and moderate-income individuals and also develops community service programs.

Community leaders told CPDC that they wanted an establishment that would provide job training and employment connections while making residents feel safe, said Albert Browne, vice president of Edgewood Community Development for CPDC.

CPDC originally focused on rebuilding the neighborhood and providing more affordable, safe housing. The organization went to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development for financial assistance, and by 1995, an up-front grant was approved that allowed CPDC to purchase the Edgewood property.

As part of that assistance, HUD asked CPDC if it was interested in incorporating technology into the infrastructure at Edgewood. The organization and residents gave an enthusiastic affirmative response. Edgewood then became the precursor of HUD's now well-established Neighborhood Networks program (www.neighborhoodnetworks.org) and recently was honored with a HUD Best Practices Award.

The original plan was to raze all the buildings and start from scratch, but CPDC decided that was unnecessary after surveying structures on the site, Zoltner said. "Everyone thought it would be better to knock everything down, but it was people problems, not buildings problems," he said.

HUD provided additional funding to build the labs and cubicles at Edgewood, and the community hooked Microsoft early on to donate equipment and applications. "Having HUD and Microsoft as full partners really got the ball rolling," Zoltner said. "So when we decided we wanted to put computers in the apartments," it wasn't long before they had a private partner.

Nine community members attended the first computer class held at Edgewood in 1995.

"When the first class of nine people graduated, it was a like a light bulb in the community, after darkness for so many years," Browne said. "It had a ripple effect throughout the community."

Zoltner said the residents have begun to demand even more from technology, and they recognize the benefits computer training and knowledge offer for education, jobs and economic development.

CPDC and other partners offer a comprehensive slate of courses to Edgewood residents and others interested in increasing their computer knowledge and skills, and gaining job training. The 12-week Computer Office Skills Employment Program targets people looking for computer and office skills to become marketable in the work force. A class of 12 students graduated this past summer.

CPDC partnered with Bell Atlantic for a Telecommunications Customer Service Training program, open to people who are 18 to 24 and have not earned a high school degree or GED. The classes teach Microsoft Office computer applications, customer service skills, English skills and career exploration during the 16-week program. Ten students completed the program this summer. The Youth Entrepreneurial Skills class, taught by students from nearby Georgetown University, helps teach Edgewood youths how to succeed in business by showing them how to write business plans, negotiate sales, and use accounting and finance techniques.

More programs have been demanded and are on the way, Zoltner said. "We're constantly starting new programs. From career enhancement to computer and office skills...and they are all free except for 25 hours of service residents must perform to put back into the community."

The Edgewood Technology Advisory Board (ETAB), which has 30 members, about a third of whom are active, has served as a liaison between CPDC and the community. Board members have been involved in beta testing the

EdgeNet thin clients, informing management what the residents need from the technology. "With emerging technology moving so rapidly, we want to get ahead and not get left behind," said Bonnita Monroe, a charter member of ETAB. "We share opinions with one another, and it's like a puzzle that comes together. The training programs have really sparked an interest [in the community]."

Monroe, an administrative specialist in the federal government and an Edgewood resident since November 1998, uses computers extensively as part of her job, but she said the classes at Edgewood have helped her learn applications that otherwise would have been inaccessible. The computer training "is outstanding because I don't have the opportunity at work to get into these classes...and it gives me the opportunity to get involved in the community," she said.

The process of providing technology to people has brought people in the neighborhood together.

During beta testing, for example, the more advanced users were helping guide people with less experience and know-how, McIlwain said. "People are visiting different apartments, and they don't even know each other, but they are teaching each other about the system," he said. "They're not asking each other for child-rearing advice, but rather, 'How do I use this damn e-mail?'"

"I've also noticed children in the community getting excited, and it's starting to spread like wildfire," Monroe said.

The Word Gets Out

People from outside the Edgewood community have heard about the technological leaps being taken there and have come to the neighborhood for training. Residents from Maryland, Virginia

and Southeast Washington, D.C., have enrolled in 12- to 14-week employment classes, and some residents are teaching night and weekend courses.

Organizations use Edgewood's network learning centers as satellite offices to help the community and to be more accessible to those who want information or aid but can't always get to the specific home sites. Howard and Georgetown universities, D.C. Family Services and American Recovery Management Systems are just a few examples of those taking advantage of cubicles within Edgewood, and more will follow, Zoltner said.

Future projects at Edgewood include a digital sound studio through a partnership with the Levine School of Music, Browne said.

The studio is scheduled to open in the spring of 2000, and Edgewood's technology infrastructure will be used to make digital recordings and teach residents how to integrate computers and music.

Once complete, the studio will take recordings done there and put them on Edgewood's network as a separate site on EdgeNet, giving everyone access to the rhythms created, Zoltner said.

"It's a great example of our partnership model. They provide the equipment and professional educators, and we give them the space and access to the community."

A Community Forum

SiteScape Inc.'s Internet-based Forum software is expected to play a key role in making EdgeNet a community-driven network, community officials said.

Forum provides a World Wide Web browser-based environment in which users can host online discussions, share documents, participate in real-time chat and take advantage of other collaborative functions, accessible only with user identifications and passwords.

"It will really help people get to know other people that live here," said John Zoltner, manager of community technology at Edgewood. "There are a lot of new people in the community, and there's no roots, so they don't know each other."

Bonnita Monroe, an Edgewood resident, said the SiteScape tool has helped establish an important dialogue among community members. "It really encourages online conversations about crime, jobs, allows you to do searches."

"It's exciting for SiteScape because this a new frontier in online communities," said Nathan Salminen, a programmer for the Maynard, Mass.-based team collaboration software company. "We bring together geographically disparate groups, but in an enclosed community.... Sociologically, it's a new use for a technological resource."

CPDC will not be creating any content for the Edgewood site but envisions community members posting their own content and generating the site on their own, as opposed to having to pay an outside source to do it, Zoltner said.