

Neighborhood Networks

Self-Help Through Urban Barter

By David Tobin

BARELY A WEEK GOES BY without some newspaper, magazine, TV or radio station drawing attention to the increasing exchange of goods and resources without money among nations, corporations, small businesses, individual professionals and neighbors. Historically, such activity surfaces during times of economic scarcity and subsides when money, employment, credit or other incentives reappear. But this time around, a new form of bartering—neighborhood-based, nonprofit skills and resource programs—has entered the scene. Neighborhood bartering is bound to outlive hard times because it focuses on a commodity which is always with us: waste.

Unlike commercial bartering and exchange of services among profes-

sionals only, neighborhood bartering taps the typically wasted talents and resources of all members of the community. These new urban programs have modified the informal bartering typical of rural communities for application in the less personal, more complex environment of the small town and larger city. As a result, they have become recognized as a significant technology for developing individual job-related skills and self-confidence. More importantly, they have restored a sense of community and interdependence among urban neighbors.

Neighborhood barter projects usually assume one of three basic forms:

- An organizational or cooperative model where residents, through an existing neighborhood organization or one established specifically to facilitate bartering, exchange skills and services.
- A brochure or "yellow pages" model where individuals publicize their skills and material resources and initiate direct swaps without a "brokering" organization.
- The traditional model, such as a babysitting pool, usually coordinated by a small group of residents or extended family members to provide a specific service among participants.

A wide variety of skills exchanges exists across the United States. The

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following organizational example, the Community Skills Exchange, is based on the successful approaches used by a number of skills exchanges operating in different areas—specifically, the Community Skills Exchange in Olympia, Washington, Skillbank in Ashland, Oregon, Give & Take Barter Center in Burlington, Vermont, and the Work Exchange in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

The Community Skills Exchange, an organizational example, is located in an urban neighborhood of 20,000 low- and middle-income residents. The exchange developed in response to many residents' complaints that the professionals who traditionally provide such services as plumbing, auto repair, sewing and carpentry no longer find it cost effective to handle minor repairs or small jobs. Other residents simply cannot afford to purchase many services and either are unable or unwilling to turn to social service agencies for assistance.

As a result, the Community Skills Exchange has attracted more than 500 members who have established files of their skills and resources. In addition, a health clinic, an advocacy group, a cultural center, a legal aid service, and a Meals-on-Wheels program participate

in the Skills Exchange, along with a print shop, food cooperative, Voluntary Action Center and the nearby community college.

The Skills Exchange operates on a system of service "credits." For each individual swap it generates, it receives a percentage of the credits exchanged. Individuals and organizations, upon establishing a file of their skills and resources to share, simultaneously establish a credit file. Credit value is determined by the amount of time needed to provide a particular service. It is primarily a medium for indirect exchange rather than a variation of the money economy.

Mary Jones, for example, is an elderly resident living alone in a sturdy but decaying old house. Her front steps were in need of repair, but she was afraid of the cost of repairing them would be out of reach. Though physically handicapped, she is an excellent seamstress and has that service to offer through the Skills Exchange.

Larry Whyte, a student at the nearby community college, has limited carpentry skills. His student budget makes the purchase of new clothes difficult. Recently, Larry joined the local food

cooperative and was given the option of working in the co-op a few hours per month or having his Skills Exchange account debited three credits, as the co-op uses member credits to barter for printing services. Larry chose the latter option.

The Skills Exchange referred Mary Jones to Larry Whyte to repair her porch. Using Mary's late husband's carpentry tools, Larry fixed her steps for five credits. He now has a surplus of two credits while Mary has a deficit of five credits. Later in the year, Larry will seek out Mary for clothing repair, which will deplete his surplus and relieve Mary of her deficit.

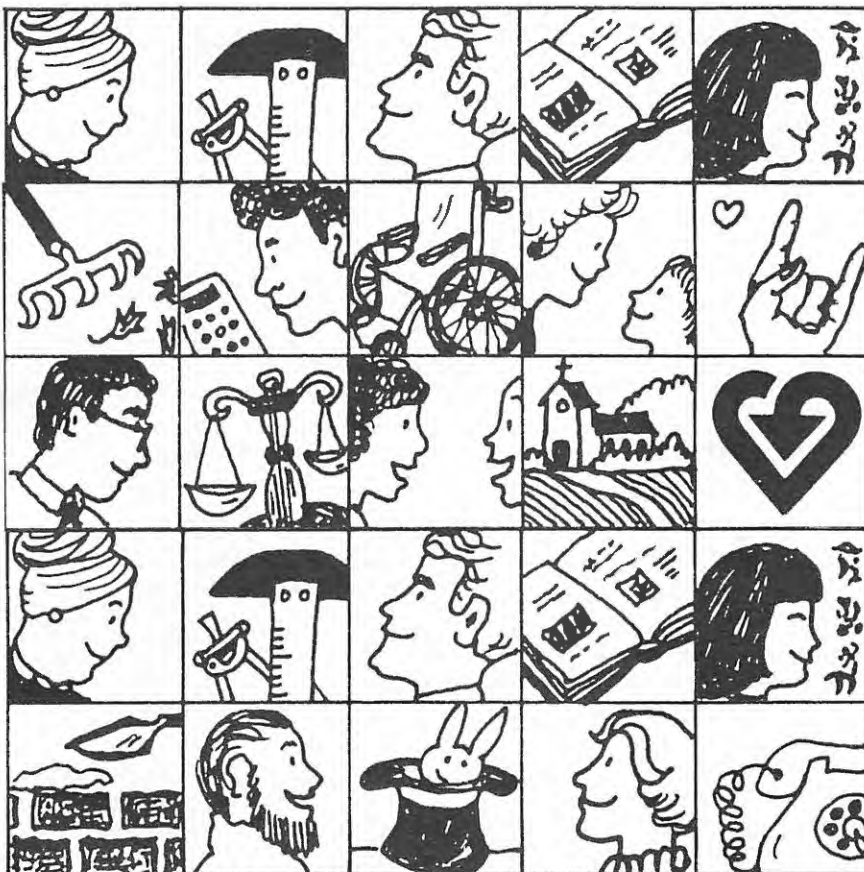
The exchange between Larry and Mary could have taken place at the same time as a direct exchange. The credit system, however, made it possible for them to exchange directly though not simultaneously.

Staffed by a full-time coordinator and volunteers working for service credits, the Skills Exchange keeps track of swaps it facilitates through the credit accounting system. A large portion of its membership, however, now facilitates its own exchanges without benefit of the organization. Having introduced the barter alternative to a large number of residents, the Community Skills Exchange remains available as a mechanism for indirect exchange to all residents and direct exchange for those unfamiliar with neighbor-to-neighbor bartering.

The Barter Project, a national support group of representatives of successful barter organizations like the Community Skills Exchange and experts on neighborhood technologies, was founded at the first National Barter Conference in March 1979. Based in Washington, D.C., it grew out of recognition that bartering provides organizations and individuals with a valuable incentive to interrelate, to eliminate wasteful duplication of efforts, to share knowledge and other resources, and to develop new competencies.

The Barter Project will support grassroots barter organizing through technical assistance, subgrants, research and training. It currently is developing the capability to provide local and national organizations with the technology to exchange, directly and indirectly, their services, competencies and resources.

For further information, write The Barter Project, 1214 16th St., NW, Washington, DC 20036.



Graphic from Volunteer Pensacola Skillbank's brochure.