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News Release

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Durham Debuts New Technology to Help Citizens Address Neighborhood Disrepair

Durham is the First City in North Carolina to Use ComNet Technology

Durham, N.C. – Durham residents interested in serving as extra eyes for City government now have their chance thanks to new technology designed to help the community prioritize its immediate, street-level needs.

The City of Durham is debuting Computerized Neighborhood Environment Tracking – or ComNet – that enables neighborhoods to use easily operated handheld computers with digital cameras so that street level conditions, such as pot holes, illegal dumping, weedy lots, litter and vacant houses, can be quickly captured, recorded and prioritized for action.

Developed by the Center on Municipal Government Performance at the Fund for the City of New York, ComNet enables groups to review neighborhood conditions, learn which City departments are responsible for the wide array of street-level conditions, determine the group's priorities and communicate them to City staff.

According to City Manager Patrick Baker, ComNet gives Durham residents a hands-on opportunity to improve their neighborhoods and communities. "One of my first actions as interim city manager three years ago was to create the Code Enforcement Nuisance Abatement Teams (CENAT) to focus on improving our neighborhoods. ComNet is a natural next step where we involve citizens in helping us prioritize what is most important to them," Baker said. "We feel this new technology addresses the important missing link by adding the voices of the

public to government performance reporting and explores alternative approaches to remedying conditions.”

Spearheaded by the City’s Office of Strategic Initiatives, a division of the City Manager’s Office, two community pilot surveys have already been conducted in both the Northeast Central Durham Operation Bull’s Eye area and in the Old Farms neighborhood. City departments are now addressing all of the priority issues identified by residents during the surveys with all non-priority issues being tracked by Durham One Call.

According to David Harris, a resident of Old Farms neighborhood that participated in a recent community survey, ComNet will ultimately improve the quality of life in Durham. “I got involved in this new program because I believe ComNet empowers us to identify street-level problems that would normally go unnoticed, collaborate with City agencies to prioritize the problems for repair, and follow up to ensure the tasks are completed,” Harris said. “The end results for Durham are not only cleaner neighborhoods but improved citizen ownership in our community.”

According to Julie Brenman, director of the City’s Office of Strategic Initiatives, ComNet adds a new layer of citizen-government communication, accountability and citizen oversight. “Walking our streets – looking for things that need to be fixed – gives you a very different perspective than driving by in a car. By using the ComNet technology, we can record problems, listen to our neighbors and continue to make Durham a great community.”

According to Brenman, the City budgeted approximately \$20,000 for this program for the first year, which paid for all training and materials, handheld computers, and the annual service agreement. After first-year start-up costs, the annual cost will be \$5,000 for the service agreement plus any additional handheld computers, which cost approximately \$800 per unit.

Neighborhood groups interested in completing a community survey will be conducted on a first-come, first-served basis since ComNet is operating with only two handheld computers at this time. All participants must attend a two-hour surveyor training class to learn how to use the handheld computers prior to conducting a community survey.

ComNet technology is currently being successfully used in New York City, Philadelphia, Seattle, Des Moines, Iowa, and Worcester, Mass. According to Brenman, Durham is the only city in North Carolina currently using this technology.

Durham residents interested in learning more about this new program can tune into this month's "CityLife" or the next episode of "City Hall This Week," both of which air during the City government's programming time slots on Time Warner Cable channel 8. For air dates and times, visit the City's Web site at www.durhamnc.gov/departments/public/dtv.cfm.

Neighborhood groups interested in scheduling a ComNet survey in their community should contact Jay Reinstein, manager with the City's Office of Strategic Initiatives, at (919) 560-4222, extension 226 or by e-mail at Jay.Reinstein@durhamnc.gov.

About the City's Office of Strategic Initiatives

The mission of the City Manager's Office of Strategic Initiatives is to improve City services by maximizing the effectiveness of people and processes. For staff contact information, visit the City's Web site at www.durhamnc.gov/departments/manager/staff_strategic.cfm.

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