



Tli Block Cluster HOMEWOOD

An Exercise in Community Engagement

gtech



Operation Better Block, Inc.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Who | What | Where | Why

The Team:

Operation Better Block (OBB) was incorporated in 1971 and has worked for successful Neighborhood and Community Development over the last forty years, focusing on the Homewood-Brushton neighborhood. Their mission is strategize, organize and mobilise residents block-by-block to benefit the Homewood community. OBB offers support by:

- Providing technical and community development assistance to Block Associations engaged in self-help projects and self-sufficiency initiatives;
- Fostering youth development through self-awareness, career exploration programs and community volunteer opportunities;
- Participating in housing development efforts to construct new housing units;
- Encouraging and supporting public and private investments to stimulate economic development in the community;
- Building cooperative partnerships with others to promote community sustainability.

Irene McLaughlin is an attorney and a mediator with a strong record of public service related to neighborhood quality of life in the Pittsburgh region. She is a solo practitioner offering blight reduction related legal expertise and mediation services for community development initiatives and charitable legal services for lower income homeowners living in distressed neighborhoods.

Growth Through Energy + Community Health (GTECH) Strategies is a Pittsburgh based, non-profit social enterprise with a mission to cultivate the unrealized economic, social and environmental health of our communities. ReClaim, one of three core program areas, addresses vacant land and the systemic problems neighborhoods face through the economic redevelopment process. GTECH works with community groups to assess, plan and implement transitional strategies while working towards a sustainable, long-term productive reuse for each site.

I. INTRODUCTION

Who | What | Where | Why

History:

Operation Better Block created a learning lab for parcel-level application of state law enabled tools for vacant property redevelopment. The initial learning lab concept paper, completed by Irene McLaughlin, J.D., projected a three-year time frame.

This learning lab represents a collaboration between McLaughlin and OBB to analyze OBB-derived parcel-level property and resident data to determine the most appropriate legal tools to apply to individual parcels. The target area for the first learning lab is referred to as T1i.



I. INTRODUCTION

Who | What | Where | Why



T1i Block Cluster:

T1i includes 46 parcels located directly across from Faison Elementary School, which fronts the 7400 & 7500 blocks of Tioga Street. Hamilton Avenue and Tioga Street are the North-South boundaries with Dunfermline Street and Richland Street as the East-West boundaries of the target area. This learning lab tested the implementation of new statewide laws and policies involving larger systems within the City of Pittsburgh and Allegheny County Courts as well as older tools within the various City departments. Surveys, personal interviews and meetings were conducted to gauge which community engagement approaches were most useful in gathering information from residents.

I. INTRODUCTION

Who | What | Where | Why

Project Overview:

OBB and McLaughlin had collected personal testimonies from T1i residents as well as parcel specific data within the target area. At that point, they analyzed the data collected and developed potential parcel strategies including rehabilitation, utilizing the City's land reserve and license agreements; code enforcements and conservatorship law. These high level strategies are essential they are often difficult tools of change for residents to equate to improving their neighborhood.

Though the T1i learning lab began as a collaborative effort between OBB and McLaughlin, it was determined during the process that a more creative partnership could be useful in the community visioning process. Based on existing design plans for Homewood, residents felt their input and concerns were excluded and undervalued. At this time, OBB reached out to GTECH Strategies to host an interactive workshop and planning process so residents could verbalize their vision for the T1i study area.

GTECH had three goals for the completion of a planning and community input process:

- Engage T1i residents in the design process
- Solicit and record feedback from residents about their block cluster
- Translate residents' thoughts and concerns in a visual way



Faison Elementary is an important anchor for the T1i Block Cluster

II. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Our Approach:

Community engagement is at the forefront of all of GTECH's work and this process was done in collaboration with the block cluster residents with feedback provided in a charrette. Charrette is a French word that translates into "little cart." At the leading architecture school in the 19th century, the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, students were assigned tough design problems to complete under time pressure. They would continue sketching as fast as they could, even as the little carts (charrettes) carried their drawing boards away to be judged and graded.

Today the word "charrette" describes a rapid, intense, and creative work session, in which a team focuses on a particular design problem from several perspectives and arrives at a collaborative solution. The charrette process is a way of evaluating issues and resources through new eyes. Fresh ideas help communities recognize and build their capacity.

GTECH used this design process to propose new ideas, receive feedback and begin distilling the ideas into one comprehensive design.

There were three recurring concerns that served as the basis for GTECH's consulting team:

- Crime and safety
- Accommodating neighborhood children's needs
- Maintenance of vacant parcels and structures





Four conceptual designs, each with unique and extreme features, were produced and presented to the residents on November 27, 2012 at a community input session. The purpose of the session was to introduce the four designs and solicit feedback on the concept behind each design.

Each concept demonstrated how smart design addresses residents' concerns in new ways and can be the starting point in creating a safer, more vibrant community. The concepts were meant to spark conversation among residents to determine pros, cons, likes and dislikes.

The four plans were named for the key design feature being introduced (from Top Left to Bottom Right):

Extending the grid, Internal Park, Scaled Properties and Consolidated Housing with Park.

Extending the Grid:

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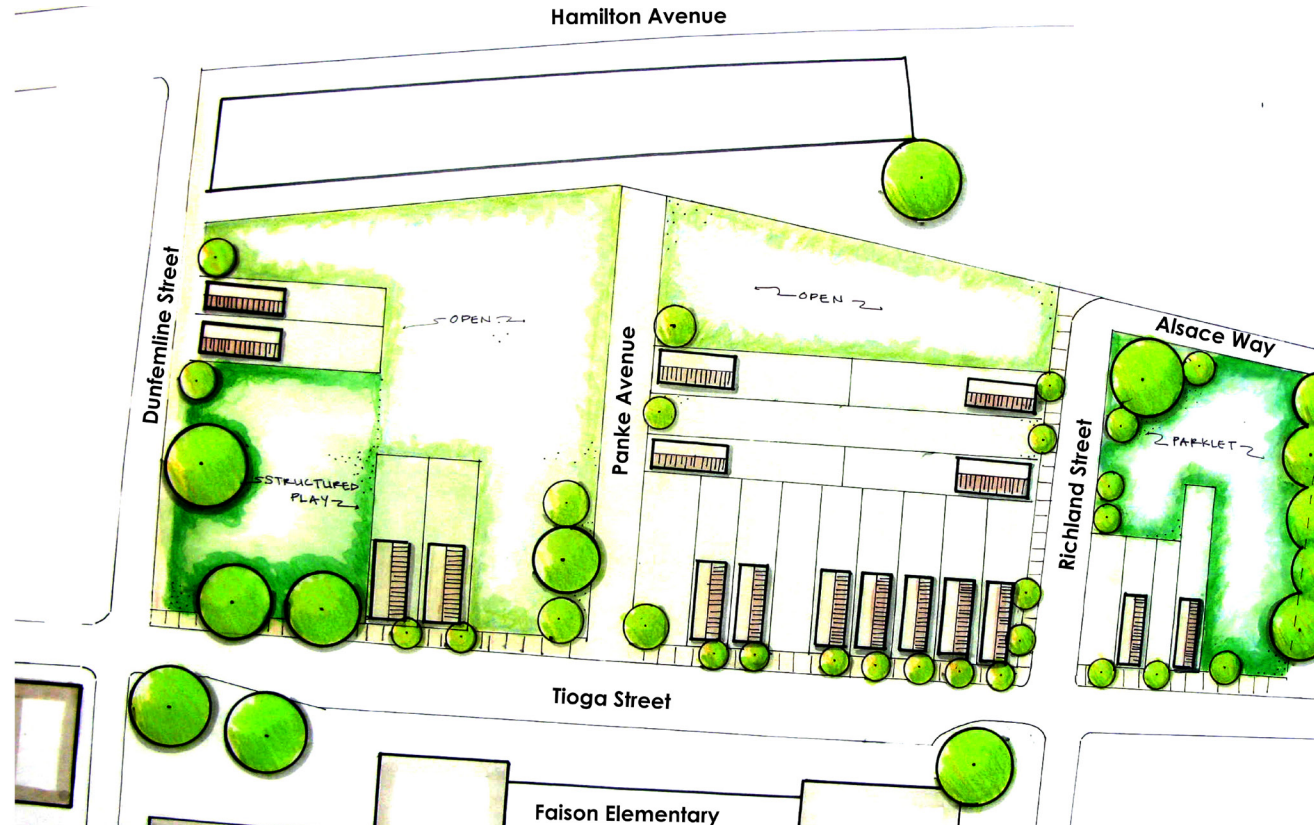
engagement

Features: Infill housing on empty lots, adding a significant new volume to the block cluster that mingle existing residents with newcomers. Additionally, the existing street grid would be extended to eliminate dead ends and improve circulation, providing each household with fronting street as well as rear alley access. Finally, this typical neighborhood layout allows for uniformity along sidewalks allowing room for street trees.

The goal of showing this concept was to hear the residents' reactions on 2 major elements. The first is the idea of bringing new and higher volume of residents to the block cluster. The second was the concept of a more connected street grid in order to reduce conflicts during school drop-off/pick-up times and to allow each residence to have private access to their lot via alleys.

The street extension and increase in residents were meant to address some of the crime issues, by eliminating dead ends and providing more "eyes on the street." More families would also build a stronger network for the children who attend Faison Elementary while the new volume would replace or repair houses that are contributing to the blight conditions.

Internal Park:



Features: Existing residents would remain untouched while vacant and unstable houses would be demolished. The resulting open space left behind could become a mix of active and passive recreation space. This is something that can be pursued immediately as there is no displacement and no built structures. This concept would not alter the existing street patterns.

The goal for this concept was to see the T1i residents' reaction to open space as a main driver for the block cluster's future vision and to see if a specific class of open space was preferred.

This concept addressed opportunities for children to play and interact. The open spaces at the rear of the block cluster are free from structures in order to eliminate hiding places and increase sight lines. In addition, it generated a plan for the vacant land while addressing the vacant buildings currently slated for demolition.

Scaled Properties:



Features: Properties would be consolidated, scaling up the size of residential lots. The existing street grid would remain, but green alleys were added in the middle of the blocks to provide additional access for the residents and to manage stormwater through permeable paving and underground trench drains.

This concept highlighted the responsibilities of ownership and pride within the community. This plan demonstrated a strong ownership of the block cluster and a desire to own larger properties and care for more of their community. This concept also provides a corner parklet as a neighborhood amenity.

Once again, this plan accommodated the presence of children in the block cluster as well as the vacancy and blight issues. Ideally, crime will be reduced since more of the properties will be homeowners and responsible residents. This plan has additional benefits in its stormwater management opportunities.

Consolidated Housing and Park:



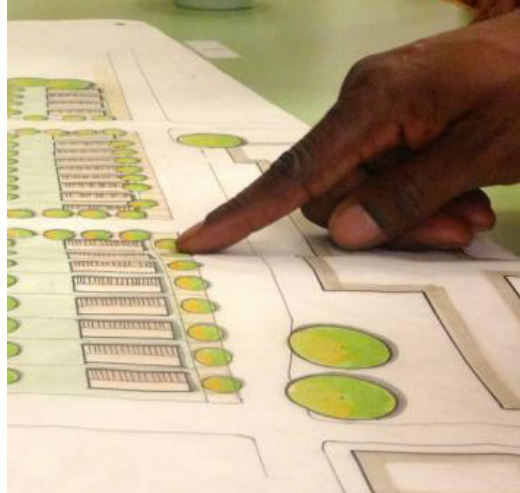
Features: New and existing houses for the current residents were consolidated to a single block in order to allow for the remainder to become a large park. This park would be a great asset to the community and to the school. Additionally, Panke St and Alsace Way have been connected and Richland St were eliminated.

It provided houses for all existing residents, preventing displacement. This concept is a variation of what is found in the Bridging the Busway plan, and was used to judge the residents' reaction to this idea without the context of the previously completed report.

This concept has its basis in a previous planning process, but was included to see if residents were able to see the merits of the concepts when presented in the context of this planning exercise.

III. REFINING THE IDEA

After the concepts were presented, attendees were given 3 green and 3 red stickers so they could physically and individually provide feedback about the features they liked most or least from each design. During this exercise residents spoke directly with OBB and GTECH staff to ask questions they had about each design as well as to talk with each other, debating the merits of the concepts. Once everyone had an opportunity to vote, the group was brought together to discuss collectively.



The comments from the residents were recorded and incorporated into a comprehensive concept which was brought back to the community for a second round of feedback. This concept was a combination of various features of the originals to reflect residents' preferences. OBB then went door to door to each resident to solicit input on the more refined intermediate design. This allowed residents to provide one-on-one feedback in a comfortable setting.



What are green alleys?

We want to clean up our neighborhood.

I see my house!

Intermediate Concept:



This intermediate plan kept all existing residents in their homes but expanded the lot size as previously shown in the Scaled Property option. Additional new construction replaced demolished structures.

Collier Street was extended to Hamilton Avenue for increased traffic flow for police and residents. Strategically placed veggie buffers and street trees are incorporated throughout the block cluster for a cohesive neighborhood feel.

A community parklet is included to provide a safe place for neighborhood children to interact. It can be a combination of active and passive recreation.

III. REFINING THE IDEA

My favorite thing is
the expanded yards.
- Mr. Morris

I support the vision. The
kids need a place to play.
- Ms. Deborah

I think the small parklet
will be good for the kids.
- Mr. Gerald

I like the mix of old and
new. The residents get to
stay with the possibility of
some new construction.
- Mr. Vernon

The Resident Driven Concept is a compilation of all resident feedback from the community input session and the one-on-one interviews conducted by OBB.

All residents remain with 5 additional with expanded lots. New construction should compliment existing house vernacular creating a cohesive look for the block cluster.

A parklet is depicted at the intersection of Panke Avenue and Tioga Street offering much needed greenspace to residents. Its placement allows for increased eyes on the street deterring their concerns of illicit behavior.

Collier Street is extended to Hamilton Avenue and sidewalks are added for pedestrian safety. Street lights and speed humps are additional resident requested amenities that will increase safety.

Conclusion: Resident-Driven Concept



IV. CONCLUSION

This phase of work included education, planning, and due diligence. The next stage of work is to move forward into the solution implementation phase. Our goal is to see the residents officially adopt this vision for this block cluster area. We will present the final vision to the residents so that they are confident that their voices were heard and the future for this area is what they hope to see.

Because the vision is longer-term, OBB will work on short-term wins that move toward the long-term vision. Resident support is a major portion of this. This includes doing tangled title work so that residents who live in their houses have the deed in their name as the official property owner; also helping residents to sign up for tax rebates is an important step. Actions like these will enable the residents who live in the area now to stay in their homes long term.

In addition to resident support, dealing with the vacancy is a vital intermediate step. After doing one-on-one interviews with residents and completing interior and exterior inspections of the abandoned houses in this area, we all came to the conclusion that the vacant structures are not able to be rehabbed and need to come down. The demolition of these structures will create vacant lots, so coming up with an ownership/maintenance strategy will be a necessary next step.

In order to make this vision a reality, OBB will continue to actively work with and engage the residents and property owners of this area. We will also work with our partners at GTECH, the City of Pittsburgh, the URA, and potential funders to ensure that the resident-driven vision is at the forefront of the future potential development of this area.



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