

It Takes More than Bricks and Mortar to Revitalize a Neighborhood

By Karen DeMasi, CityWide Development Corporation

What makes a great neighborhood? If you think about the qualities of life we all value, they are easy to list: safety, affordable housing, nearby parks and public amenities, shopping close by, friendly neighbors. Isn't this what we all want?

At CityWide Development Corporation in Dayton, we keep these qualities in mind as we put comprehensive plans together to turn troubled neighborhoods around. We became convinced early on that it was going to take more than bricks and mortar for our projects to be successful. Citywide's comprehensive approach to neighborhood change – specifically, inclusion of and outreach to residents and emphasis on the development of social capital – sets it apart from other organizations doing similar work.

CityWide's neighborhood revitalization efforts are designed to pursue change on four levels:

- 1) **Economic** – through revitalizing aging business districts and encouraging entrepreneurial business development;
- 2) **Physical** – through removing blight and developing affordable and market-rate housing;
- 3) **Social** – through providing support services for children and families and amenities that promote high quality of life; and
- 4) **Civic** – through community organizing and capacity-building.

While the most obvious neighborhood revitalization efforts are often physical, such as the demolition of dilapidated properties and the rehabilitation of neighborhood housing, CityWide believes the programs and services that support and enhance family life, such as safety and social supports, are vital parts of a healthy neighborhood. Therefore, our comprehensive initiatives include community organizing and neighborhood capacity-building strategies to help stabilize neighborhoods while social capital is built.

About CityWide Development Corporation

CityWide Development Corporation was created in 1972, when Dayton faced a major decline in manufacturing. For many years, core services focused on providing gap financing to attract and expand businesses in the city, lending products for homeowners, and major redevelopment efforts.

In the last decade, the organization has been a key player in designing and implementing comprehensive neighborhood revitalization initiatives throughout Dayton. Each project has taught new lessons that have helped the organization refine its approach to neighborhood redevelopment.

This approach requires partners who share these goals. CityWide's Neighborhood Development Division has developed creative partnerships with the private sector around mutual interests to pursue major redevelopment efforts. One of these efforts is known as the Phoenix Project.

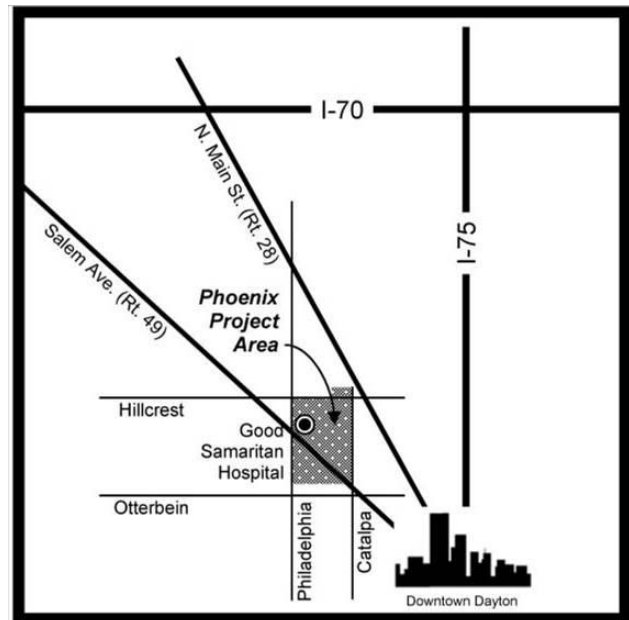
The Phoenix Project

The Phoenix Project is a public-private partnership investing millions of dollars for redevelopment activities in the greater Fairview neighborhood, an older area located northwest of downtown Dayton. The neighborhood is home to Good Samaritan Hospital, which recently celebrated its 75th anniversary and is one of the largest employers in the area.

Like many urban areas, parts of the neighborhood surrounding the hospital had begun to decline and the ravages of predatory lending practices greatly impacted the stability of the housing market. As a result, many homes were going into foreclosure throughout the area.

Hospital officials were very concerned about the impact the neighborhood had on their ability to recruit and retain staff, patient choice, and the safety and security of visitors to their facility. The City of Dayton was concerned as well, as Dayton's economy is sluggish and healthcare is one of the few market segments that is growing. Healthcare-related employment is the second-largest employment sector in the region.

The residents of the neighborhood association surrounding the hospital also were concerned. Many had lived in the neighborhood for years in beautiful, turn-of-the-20th-century homes, which were their largest investment. Residents saw the decline of the neighborhood on a daily basis and were concerned about their future and whether they should continue living in the community. CityWide believed that these organizations could work together for mutual gain to improve the neighborhood.



A comprehensive approach

Working together, the stakeholders developed a comprehensive strategy for neighborhood revitalization and the Phoenix Project was launched. The project began with community organizing to build productive relationships between neighborhood residents and private-sector leaders whom CityWide had brought to the table. It was a slow and tenuous process at first, but CityWide worked diligently to build a mandate for the improvement of the community and the development of goals that everyone could share. Those goals included:

- 1) Commercial and economic revitalization of the major artery running through the community;
- 2) Expansion of homeownership opportunities through the creation of new housing;
- 3) Developing partnerships with the nonprofit sector to encourage them to bring their resources to the neighborhood to provide needed social supports; and
- 4) Strengthening the civic infrastructure of the community through resident engagement and community organizing.

In 2004, the City of Dayton and Good Samaritan Hospital pledged an initial \$5 million each to these neighborhood improvement efforts. CityWide is managing the project and is providing a \$1 million loan pool for secondary financing in the form of home improvement loans and commercial loans. CityWide also worked with Good Samaritan to create two incentive plans to encourage Good Samaritan Hospital employees and others to buy homes in the neighborhood. In addition, the Phoenix Home Improvement Loan program is enabling existing homeowners to improve their homes.

The Phoenix team identified and took control of 75 parcels that were negatively impacting the neighborhood, demolishing most of them, clearing the neighborhood of blight and assembling land for new housing. Important partnerships were established with the Dayton Police Department, area youth services agencies, and the Dayton Public Schools to enhance the quality of life for the area's youth and families. Major crime is down over 50 percent since 2004 and a strong neighborhood association has been built.

The centerpiece of the Phoenix project is Fairview Commons, a new civic space created in the interior of this urban neighborhood which links new housing with public amenities that include a K-8 school, park, pool and spray ground. By tying the self-interest of private-sector leaders to their values as civic leaders, and by linking them with similarly motivated community leaders, a true working partnership was created and a neighborhood revitalized.

Ten Lessons for Success in Comprehensive Community Development

One of the most important lessons we have learned at CityWide is to create space in the organization for reflection and discussion. No two projects are exactly the same, and there is always something new to learn. Though the list below is not inclusive of every lesson we have learned, it covers a lot of ground and may be useful to others in community development work.

Lesson One: No one can do this alone. Committed stakeholders who come to consensus around mutual self-interest can do great things.

Lesson Two: The bigger the idea, the better the opportunity to gain support. People like bold thinking that is grounded in reality. Don't forget to "think big" and defend your strategies with data, facts and best-practice examples of what worked elsewhere.

Lesson Three: The CityWide approach takes more than a one-year commitment. This is hard work. Urban neighborhoods did not get in their current state overnight. Time and resources are needed to implement bold ideas.

Lesson Four: Self-interest can be harnessed for mutual gain if people are willing to be honest. Stakeholders rarely will agree on every aspect of a project. Find common ground and admit differences. Then, agree to disagree but keep moving for the common good.

Lesson Five: GIS mapping plans and concept drawings are worth a thousand words. The visual impact of these tools cannot be underestimated for their ability to transmit ideas to a variety of audiences.

Lesson Six: Develop a plan and guiding principles for your efforts. Put them in writing. Keep everyone on the same page by referring to this document often.

Lesson Seven: Develop an open process for guiding the decisions of your project. Develop a management structure for the project that is transparent so everyone understands their roles and how decisions are made.

Lesson Eight: Physical change is slow, so don't forget the "soft" side. Some people will not believe in your project until demolition ends and construction starts. This makes it extra important to engage residents in your plans and ideas so they can understand the development strategies at work and why things can take a long time. Pursuit of community policing, neighborhood capacity-building and youth programs are ways to keep people engaged and encouraged. Active, committed residents are your best allies.

Lesson Nine: Change happens - plan for it. Make sure to have a system in place to respond to changes in the project and market demand so you don't lose momentum. Build in the flexibility to embrace change as an inevitable factor in this type of work.

Lesson Ten: Patience. You will need an endless supply. Remember Rome wasn't built in a day. Stay the course.

Lessons in Rural Disaster Recovery: The Case of Greensburg, Kansas

By David Boehm and Louise Anderson

Between tornadoes, floods and wildfires, it's been a devastating spring in many parts of the United States. Sometimes there's time to prepare for pending destruction, as with Mississippi River flooding, but more often there isn't. Life can be normal one day and in wreckage the next, painful experiences that Joplin, Mo., and Tuscaloosa, Ala., recently endured.

Rebuilding after a disaster, while never easy, is particularly tough for rural towns that were already in decline. This was the case in Greensburg, Kan. (pop. 1,389 in 2006), which was leveled by a tornado in the spring of 2007.

Greensburg's population peaked at around 2,000 residents in 1960. Agriculture has always been the main economic driver, followed by some retail and services. But after the tornado killed 10 people and severely damaged or destroyed 90 percent of the town's structures, residents knew that if they didn't try something different, they might as well lock the door and turn out the lights.

The idea of focusing on environmentally sustainable redevelopment came about quickly, but almost by chance. "Quite honestly, our citizens would not want to be viewed as tree-huggers or something like that," said Steve Hewitt, Greensburg's city manager at the time of the disaster. But after telling then-governor Kathleen Sebelius that the town intended to build back stronger, better and more resilient, she described it as a "green" approach, and the idea took off like wildfire.