
Executive Summary

The Olivette Park neighborhood of East St. Louis, Illinois is a 70-block area bounded by Collinsville Avenue, St. Clair Avenue, 20th Street, and State Street/Martin Luther King Boulevard. Because of its proximity to the city's central business district and its unique physical, social, and historic assets, Olivette Park is one of the most important and visible neighborhoods in East St. Louis. Once called "Quality Hill," where the city's elite resided, the neighborhood has maintained its historic character through the rehabilitation of many large, historic homes and buildings. Olivette Park contains several of the city's most significant cultural, educational, social, and religious institutions, as well as a number of successful, locally-owned businesses. Most importantly, the neighborhood is home to a core of caring and dedicated residents with strong ties to Olivette Park and East St. Louis.

In the past three decades, however, the severe economic downturn of East St. Louis has negatively impacted Olivette Park. The neighborhood suffers from a host of problems equal or greater in magnitude than the city as a whole, including population decline, poverty, unemployment, low educational attainment, deteriorating infrastructure, physical blight, and abandonment. These problems have diminished the quality of life in Olivette Park and have caused many residents to leave.

In an effort to stop this deterioration, the City of East St. Louis Community Development Block Grant Office provided funding to the University of Illinois' East St. Louis Action Research Project to work with residents to develop a stabilization and improvement plan. In order to create a plan that truly reflected the needs and desires of residents, a participatory action research model was used throughout the planning process. Residents were involved in each step as co-investigators, co-planners, and co-designers. This document, *The Olivette Park Action Revitalization Plan*, represents a 10-month, cooperative effort between the University of Illinois East St. Louis Action Research Project and residents, business owners, religious leaders, and social service providers of Olivette

Park. It presents an analysis of neighborhood strengths and weaknesses, an overall development goal for the neighborhood, six neighborhood improvement areas, and an implementation strategy.

Summary of Strengths and Weaknesses

Olivette Park is a neighborhood characterized by many issues—both positive and negative—that must be addressed through a stabilization and improvement plan. To obtain a clear and accurate snapshot of neighborhood conditions, six data collection activities were undertaken: a windshield survey, archival research, a review of census information, an inventory of physical conditions of the neighborhood, a compilation of resident and institutional leaders perceptions through personal interviews, and a day-long Olivette Park Neighborhood Summit. At the summit, residents and university students worked together to analyze these data sets and synthesized them into 11 strengths and 10 weaknesses. The following is an overview of these strengths and weaknesses.

Strengths

1. Location

Olivette Park is located near the city’s central business district and the waterfront. Two main commercial thoroughfares—State Street/Martin Luther King Boulevard and Collinsville Avenue—form the neighborhood’s boundaries, making Olivette Park highly visible to other residents of the city.

2. Accessibility

Olivette Park has quick access to two interstates (I-64 and I-55/70) which link the neighborhood to regional resources in Illinois and Missouri. In addition, Olivette Park is located near a downtown light rail stop and is served by several bus routes, providing public transportation access to the neighborhood.

3. Mixed Land Uses and Available Land

Olivette Park is primarily residential, but also contains a mix of commercial, social service, industrial, religious, and public land uses. In addition, there is a large amount of vacant land suitable for commercial or residential redevelopment.

4. Quality Building Stock

Olivette Park is home to an impressive collection of historic homes and structures. There is an increasing interest in historic preservation in the neighborhood, and many historic homes have been restored on and near Washington Place.

5. Cultural and Educational Community Assets

Olivette Park contains many of the city's most important cultural institutions and is targeted for a proposed East St. Louis Cultural District. These institutions include the Katherine Dunham Dynamic Museum, the GEMM Centre, the East St. Louis Public Library, Christian Activity Center, the Family Center, the Catholic Day Care Center, the Boys Club, and the Salvation Army.

6. Active Business Sector

Olivette Park is home to many successful, locally-owned businesses that serve the area's retail, wholesale, and service needs. Vacant land along the two commercial thoroughfares bordering Olivette Park offers an opportunity for future investment and economic growth.

7. Religious Institutions

Olivette Park contains at least 19 active churches of various sizes serving a range of denominations. Several of these churches provide youth and social service programs to neighborhood residents. In addition, many church leaders and congregation members have been active in the Olivette Park planning process.

8. Community Involvement

Olivette Park residents are actively involved in neighborhood and city-wide organizations. Within Olivette Park, residents have been actively involved in the Olivette Park Local Development Corporation and the Olivette Park Neighborhood Association. City-wide, residents from Olivette Park participate in the East St. Louis Cultural Coalition and the East St. Louis Community Action Network.

9. Municipal Commitment

In recent years, the city has made a serious commitment to improving the quality of life in Olivette Park by providing money for capital improvements, sponsoring a community redevelopment planning effort, and providing community block grant funds.

10. History

Olivette Park has a rich neighborhood history. Once identified as “Quality Hill”, many former mayors, industrialists, doctors and lawyers called it home until the 1950s. A portion of Pennsylvania Avenue is currently listed on the National Historic Register. In addition, world-renowned dancer and choreographer Katherine Dunham resides in the neighborhood.

11. People

In a recent survey, residents consistently listed people as the number one asset of the neighborhood. A core of lifelong residents who look out for each other provides stability to the neighborhood.

Weaknesses

1. Population Decline

The population decline in Olivette Park, in terms of individuals, families, and households, has been steeper than that of East St. Louis as a whole. This decline has occurred in the context of slow population growth and ongoing suburbanization in St. Clair County.

2. Poverty

Widespread poverty is one of the most alarming problems in Olivette Park. The number of Olivette Park families living below the poverty level has increased dramatically in 20 years, from one-third of the families in 1970 to one-half of the families in 1990. In addition, nearly three-fourths of the female-headed households in the neighborhood live in poverty.

3. Lack of Housing and Housing Expense

Olivette Park experienced a 60 percent decrease both in the overall number of housing units from 1970 to 1990, as well as the number of occupied housing units. Olivette Park homeowners, on average, spend more than half of their income to meet mortgage and related housing expenses, compared to other East St. Louis residents, who spend about one-third of their income, and St. Clair County residents, who spend about one-fourth of their income.

4. Unemployment

Nearly a quarter of the Olivette Park work force is unemployed, and residents are extremely concerned about the lack of available jobs and the quality of job training programs. St. Clair County

residents experience only a 14 percent unemployment rate, which seems to indicate that employment is available within the region for people with adequate education, skills, and transportation.

5. Low Educational Attainment

The percentage of high school graduates in Olivette Park is increasing—from 27 percent in 1970 to 49 percent in 1990—but it still lags behind the city and the county. Similarly, the percentage of people with a bachelor’s degree or higher is significantly below the city of East St. Louis and the county.

6. Unattended Property

A physical condition survey revealed nearly one-fifth of the parcels in the neighborhood - close to 350 properties—were unattended, that is, grass and weeds were more than one foot high and a substantial amount of trash had accumulated on the site. These unattended properties—many of which are held by St. Clair County as trustee property—pose a substantial health and safety risk to residents, especially children.

7. Dilapidated/Dangerous Buildings

According to a building condition survey, at least 68 structures in Olivette Park need to be demolished. At least one-fifth of the structures in the neighborhood are unoccupied and unboarded. These derelict structures pose a great danger to the neighborhood, as they often serve as havens for illegal activity. Moreover, some property owners face the threat of losing their insurance due to the adjacent derelict structures.

8. Deteriorating Infrastructure

Residents of Olivette Park indicated that they were generally dissatisfied with the quality of infrastructure in the neighborhood. A physical survey of infrastructure conditions revealed that several streets in the neighborhood were in poor or deteriorated condition, curbs and sidewalks were missing or in deteriorated condition in several areas, and drains were missing at several intersections.

9. Lack of Retail Services

Residents expressed an overall dissatisfaction with the availability of retail services in their community, especially the lack of entertainment facilities, restaurants, grocery stores, and discount

stores. Residents often must travel outside of East St. Louis to purchase basic consumer goods.

10. Crime

Residents and business owners of Olivette Park identified crime as among the most serious issues confronting their neighborhood. Despite a decline in many specific crimes and the overall crime rate in East St. Louis between 1993 and 1994, the crime rate continues to be one of the highest in the state.

Goals and Initiatives

After the preceding strengths and weaknesses were confirmed by residents at a day-long, neighborhood summit, residents created an overall development goal containing six action improvement initiatives to guide the stabilization and redevelopment of Olivette Park:

Overall
Development Goal

To utilize Olivette Park's substantial physical, social, spiritual, and human resources to improve the quality of life for local residents and business owners through a comprehensive community development program focused on housing improvement, environmental improvement, public safety, economic development, cultural arts resources and youth development.

The following is a brief description of each of the six action improvement initiatives and the projects recommended under each. Projects are ordered from least to most difficult to implement.

Housing
Improvement

To enhance the residential quality of Olivette Park by preserving and improving the existing housing stock as well as finding opportunities for new affordable housing construction.

- Organize scrape-up and paint-up program
- Create demolition proposal
- Hold a home improvement and maintenance fair
- Apply for HOME funds to implement a housing rehabilitation program in Olivette Park
- Explore the feasibility of new housing construction

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- Environmental Improvement* To improve the health and safety of all residents as well as improve the appearance of the neighborhood through a series of environmental improvement programs.
- **Clean-up vacant lots in neighborhood**
 - **Work with city officials to improve neighborhood services**
 - **Clean-up and fix-up Sunken Park**
 - **Repair and construction of sidewalks**
 - **Develop youth environmental education and employment program**
- Crime Prevention* To improve the security of Olivette Park through crime prevention and home and business security programs.
- **Expand participation in existing crime prevention programs**
 - **Develop neighborhood crime watch program**
 - **Conduct safety and security surveys for homes and businesses**
 - **Coordinate group purchasing of safety and security equipment**
 - **Work with East St. Louis Community Oriented Policing program**
 - **Partner with other organizations to improve drug prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation programs**
- Economic Development* To expand local business and employment opportunities by informing residents and business owners of available resources, providing unemployed and underemployed residents with basic job skills that can improve their employment prospects and creating a business environment that fosters local business.
- **Create a local business directory and establish a buy-local campaign**
 - **Organize a government information meeting**
 - **Establish a community-based tutoring, job training, and adult literacy program**
 - **Develop an infrastructure replacement demonstration area**
 - **Work with the city to formulate a capital improvements plan that addresses the infrastructure needs of residents and business owners.**

Cultural Resources To stabilize and use the neighborhood's considerable existing cultural resources and historic assets to promote the revitalization of the physical environment and to strengthen the social fabric of the community.

- Help stabilize the Katherine Dunham Dynamic Museum and programs
- Plan and hold a one-day cultural arts festival, eventually expanding it to a weekend and then a week-long event.
- Form a planning committee to develop a school/community-based cultural arts curriculum, and then pilot the program at Hughes-Quinn Rock Junior High
- Prepare a renovation plan for existing cultural arts facilities and conduct a feasibility study for the development of a new cultural arts facility

Youth Development To increase educational, recreational, and cultural opportunities for youth in the neighborhood, and encourage their participation and commitment to community redevelopment.

- Create a directory detailing community services and activities for youth
- Involve youth in annual Bolden Community Garden project
- Coordinate a youth-produced video detailing the historic and contemporary environment of the neighborhood
- Organize a day-long youth summit to discuss issues important to youth

Implementation Strategy

The residents, business owners, religious leaders and social service providers of Olivette Park have invested a great deal of energy in developing *The Olivette Park Action Revitalization Plan*. The next challenge is to organize the neighborhood association to implement the plan. Several resources and recommendations are presented to ensure the successful implementation of the plan. Some of these suggestions include:

- Formalizing a committee structure for the neighborhood association
- Obtaining 501(c)3 status from the Internal Revenue Service
- Identifying sources of technical assistance

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- Developing fund raising strategies
 - Conducting regular membership recruitment drives
 - Ensuring that the Olivette Park Neighborhood Association is proactive, rather than reactive to community and city-wide affairs

Organization of Report

The Olivette Park Action Revitalization Project contains three parts: *The Olivette Park Action Revitalization Plan*, which is this document, and contains a summary of important neighborhood data as well as specific program initiatives; *The Olivette Park Action Revitalization Plan* poster, which is a one-page summary of the project; and *The Olivette Park Databook*, which contains all census, physical condition, and community perception data. All of these documents are available at the East St. Louis Public Library, 405 N. 9th St. Access to the report is also available via the internet, through the East St. Louis Action Research Project web site: <http://imlab9.landarch.uiuc.edu/~eslarp/>