

Introduction

From 1959 to 1990, East St. Louis, Illinois deteriorated from a heralded “All-American City” to a national symbol of urban blight. Located on the Mississippi River, the East St. Louis of today faces severe economic, social, and environmental problems. Nearly one-quarter of the city’s work force is unemployed, about 40 percent of families are living below the poverty level, and only slightly more than half of residents are high school graduates. But East St. Louis was not always a distressed community. With strong ties to St. Louis and the surrounding region, East St. Louis once flourished as the country’s second busiest railroad hub. Powerful economic and socio-political forces, as well as unfortunate historical circumstance, propelled the city into a downward spiral that drastically decreased the quality of life in East St. Louis. This chapter provides a brief history of the East St. Louis journey: its beginnings as a transportation and manufacturing powerhouse, its post-war industrial abandonment and subsequent economic devastation, and its slow road to recovery. In addition, this chapter will describe the history of the Olivette Park neighborhood, and the origin and goals of *The Olivette Park Action Revitalization Plan*.

History of East St. Louis

The settling of the area now known as East St. Louis dates back to the 1790s, when James Piggot built a rock and timber road north from Cahokia through the Grand Marais, a swamp in the flood plain known as the American Bottom. On the Illinois side of the Mississippi, just across from St. Louis, Piggot built a ferry landing and began transporting people across the river in 1797.¹ With the road and river passages, people began settling this section of the American Bottom, which became known as the village of Illinoistown. By the mid-1800s, these settlers were producing most of the agricultural products consumed by St. Louis residents. Beginning in the 1830s, coal mined in the Belleville bluffs just east of Illinoistown was transported to St. Louis by ferry. In 1861, the people of Illinoistown voted to change the village’s name to East

St. Louis to symbolize the relationship with its Missouri neighbor.²

The extension of rail lines to East St. Louis enhanced its image as a major transportation center. The completion of the Ohio & Mississippi Railroad from Cincinnati to the East St. Louis riverfront in 1857 marked the first of many eastern railroads to establish western terminals in East St. Louis. In fact, by the early 20th century, East St. Louis became the western terminus of 22 eastern railroad lines.³ Superior transportation access, abundant available land, cheap coal, and proximity to St. Louis, Chicago, and Indianapolis attracted industries to the East St. Louis area. The years between 1890 and 1930 were known as the “golden era” in the city’s industrial history, during which East St. Louis established itself as a major meat-packing, metal-bending, and chemical producing center. These industries promised steady jobs at relatively high wages, attracting an influx of European immigrants and African Americans from the South to East St. Louis. The population exploded from about 18,000 residents in 1890 to 75,000 in the 1920s, and it reached its peak in 1945, at 83,000 residents.

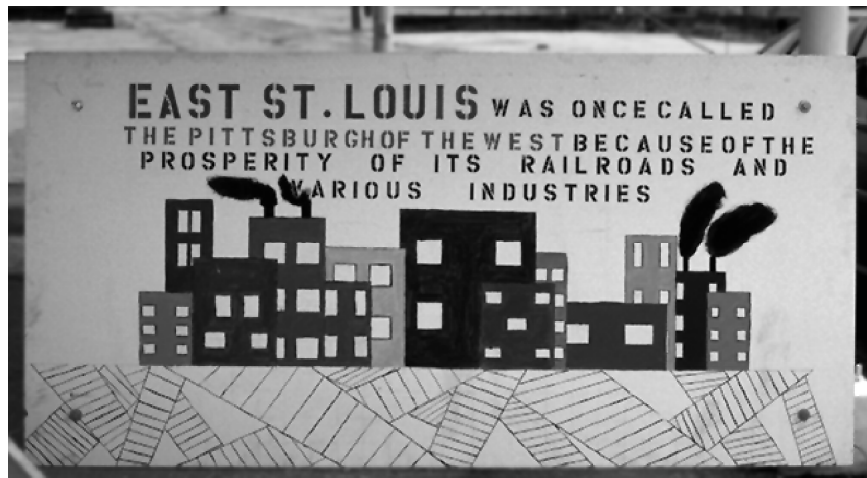


Figure 1.1. The early industrial prowess of East St. Louis earned it the title “Pittsburgh of the West” (Decorative panel at the East St. Louis Farmers Market)

Despite its image as a booming industrial center in the early 1900s, certain factors set the stage in East St. Louis for its future economic problems. Most of the major industries located outside of the East St. Louis city limits to avoid paying the city’s property taxes. The Aluminum Ore company located in what came to be known as Alorton. The National Stock Yards located in what developed into National City (figure 1.2). Monsanto located in the

area now known as Sauget.⁴ These industries took advantage of the city's plentiful labor force and public services, but contributed nothing to the city's property tax base. The city's efforts to legally annex these areas were repeatedly thwarted in the Illinois General Assembly, as the industries threatened to move their facilities to other states if forced to pay higher taxes.⁵ In 1920, East St. Louis was the second poorest city of more than 50,000 residents in the country.⁶

Political corruption and labor and racial tensions also contributed to the decline of East St. Louis. Many African Americans migrated from the South in search of high paying jobs and affordable homes in East St. Louis. The area also attracted Eastern European immigrants. This changing population and long-standing racial tensions erupted in 1917, with one of the deadliest race riots in the nation's history. Employees at the Aluminum Ore Corporation went on strike in April of 1917, and the company brought in strike-breakers, some of whom were African American. White workers blamed the black workers for the defeat of their strike, and riots broke out for a brief time in May. On July 1, 1917, a group of whites sped through a black neighborhood, randomly shooting at homes. When two police detectives arrived to investigate the shooting, the black residents fired at them, mistaking the officers for more shooters. Both detectives died, and riots ensued. The next day, white mobs began stoning and clubbing blacks in public areas and burning down homes in black neighborhoods. When African-American residents tried to escape the burning homes, they were shot. In total, 39 blacks and eight whites were killed during the riots, and more than 300 buildings were destroyed. After the riots, 11 blacks were convicted of shooting the police detectives, and only four whites were convicted for murdering the African-American citizens. It is estimated that nearly 4,000 African-American residents left East St. Louis after the riots.⁷



Figure 1.2. National City, Illinois. One of several “company towns” bordering East St. Louis.

The East St. Louis economy began to show visible signs of faltering when the Depression forced many East St. Louis industries to close. The old factories had become obsolete and would not be rebuilt because East St. Louis had lost its locational advantage due to technological innovations. However, World War II industrial demand and post-war consumer spending gave the East St. Louis economy a temporary reprieve. In fact, relative economic stability and a high rate of home ownership among low and middle-income residents earned East St. Louis an All-American Cities Award from the National Municipal League and a profile in *Look* magazine in 1959.⁸ But external technological advancements soon transformed prosperity into economic decline in East St. Louis. Industries that had always relied on railroads for transportation switched to the trucking industry for faster and more efficient transport, diminishing East St. Louis' locational advantage. The advent of refrigerated railroad cars and trucks also eliminated the need for regional meat-packing centers, and many of the food processing firms near the National Stockyards moved to more efficient locations near ranches in the North and West.⁹ Many of the area's largest employers, industries such as Alcoa and Obeir Nester Glass, completely phased out their operations.¹⁰ Nine major industries left East St. Louis between 1950 and 1964, and many middle class white and black families followed their employer's lead.

This economic devastation of the area's industry trickled down to the area's retail and service sector and further eroded the faltering economy and population.¹¹ In total, the city lost nearly 15,000 jobs and 40,000 people between 1960 and 1990. The number of firms in East St. Louis declined from 1,527 in 1967 to 383 in 1987. The city's tax base shrunk from \$560 million to \$190 million between 1970 and 1990, forcing city officials to cut all but its most essential services.¹² Despite these cuts, city officials were forced to seek state protection from creditors under the Distressed Cities Act of 1991. The state helped East St. Louis avoid bankruptcy by providing a \$3.75 million loan so the city could meet its payroll for the rest of the year. In addition, the state helped the city negotiate with creditors to retire an \$80 million debt through issuing a \$23 million bond. In return, the city was forced to accept state oversight of its budget and fiscal affairs by the State Financial Advisory Authority.¹³

In recent years, the City of East St. Louis has slowly begun to rebound. The worst of the city's population losses appear to be over. Re-establishment of several basic city services, including new fire trucks and police vehicles, has made the city a safer place to live. The restructuring of city government and the hiring of a professional city manager has resulted in a more professional, efficient government. Citizens have noted these improvements in municipal government and have renewed their hope in a better future for East St. Louis. Active, grassroots organizations have developed to improve neighborhood and city-wide conditions. City leaders have recognized the value of neighborhood involvement in city affairs and have supported community efforts. *The Olivette Park Action Revitalization Plan*, funded by the Community Development Block Grant Office, is evidence of municipal commitment to improving the quality of life in the city's neighborhoods.

Olivette Park History

Once called "Quality Hill," --where the region's wealthiest citizens lived—the neighborhood was severely impacted by the city's economic decline and today faces problems equal or worse in magnitude than the city as a whole. Olivette Park is a 70-block area located near the city's central business district, bounded by Collinsville Avenue, St. Clair Avenue, 20th Street, and State Street/Martin Luther King Boulevard (see maps, pp. 6-7). Between 1970 and 1990, many of the city's middle- and upper-income families fled Olivette Park and other East St. Louis neighborhoods for the suburbs. The neighborhood's population fell from 5,895 residents to 1,958 residents, while the percentage of families living below the poverty level increased from one-third to one-half. As a result of these changes, the number of occupied housing units in the neighborhood dropped from 1,580 to 595. The decreasing number of commercial and industrial tax payers in the city contributed to the erosion of the tax base and, consequently, the neighborhood's infrastructure, such as streets, sidewalks and parks, deteriorated. Today, many of the streets are missing curbs and sidewalks, more than half of the parcels of land in the neighborhood are vacant, and one-fifth of the structures in the neighborhood are candidates for demolition.

Despite these problems, neighborhood residents and local leaders have not given up hope. They have shown a strong desire to solve pressing neighborhood problems and build upon the neighborhood's many strengths. Olivette Park is home to many large, historic homes, many of which have been restored and preserved. Many of the city's most important social service and cultural institutions are located within Olivette Park, including the Katherine Dunham Dynamic Museum, the East St. Louis Public Library, the GEMM Centre, the Salvation Army, School District 189, the East St. Louis Boys' Club, the Christian Activity Center, the Family Center, and 19 churches. The neighborhood is also home to many active businesses, a significant number of which are locally owned. Most importantly, many residents have strong or even lifelong ties to East St. Louis and Olivette Park and are committed to improving their neighborhood.



Figure 1.3. The Katherine Dunham Dynamic Museum is a prime example of Olivette Park's past splendor, as well as its present cultural resources.

Residents act on that commitment by participating in the Olivette Park Neighborhood Association (OPNA). The OPNA is a concerned group of neighborhood residents dedicated to improving the quality of life within the Olivette Park neighborhood. The neighborhood association was organized on April 7, 1995 by a small group of Olivette Park residents. Some of the initial activities of the OPNA included the development of the Bolden Community Garden and organization of youth activities, including a

Halloween party. The Olivette Park Neighborhood Association firmly believes and practices its motto that “By Working Together, We Are Keeping East St. Louis Together.” The Olivette Park Neighborhood Association is currently led by the following four officers: Ms. Mamie Bolden, president; Mr. Rocco Goins, vice-president; Ms. Mildred Drisdell Brown, secretary; and Ms. Rose Henderson Williams; treasurer. In addition, Mr. John Wright serves as the group’s chaplain, and Ms. Minola Brown as social chair.

Origins of the Olivette Park Action Revitaliza- tion Project

The desire to protect and preserve Olivette Park’s unique physical and social assets led several East St. Louis groups to lobby the city for additional resources for the neighborhood. The Olivette Park Local Development Corporation (OPLDC) historically functioned as the redevelopment arm of the neighborhood and expressed interest in seeing a comprehensive redevelopment plan completed for the neighborhood. The OPLDC also served as a member of the East St. Louis Cultural Coalition, which has worked on the development of an East St. Louis Cultural District. Olivette Park, with its wealth of historic and cultural resources, would serve as the focal point of the cultural district. Mr. Norman Ross, director of the East St. Louis Chamber of Commerce and board member of the OPLDC, convinced the city’s Community Development Block Grant Office of the need for a comprehensive redevelopment plan for Olivette Park and a feasibility study of an East St. Louis Cultural District. In May 1995, Ms. Diane Bonner, director of the CDBG office, put out a request for proposals seeking a consultant to work with Olivette Park residents to develop a comprehensive neighborhood plan.

The University of Illinois’ East St. Louis Action Research Project (ESLARP) submitted a proposal shortly after the CDBG request was made public. ESLARP’s proposal outlined a participatory action research method for the Olivette Park plan similar to the planning process the university had used in completing similar plans with the Emerson Park, Winstanley/Industry Park, Lansdowne, and Edgemont neighborhoods. The core of the proposal featured a cooperative approach to neighborhood improvement in Olivette Park, involving neighborhood residents in each step of the planning process. Neighborhood residents were viewed

as co-planners, co-designers, and co-investigators. To carry out the cultural district feasibility portion of the project, ESLARP sub-contracted with the University of Illinois Department of Leisure Studies, which has extensive experience in evaluating and developing local cultural resources.

The University of Illinois was awarded the contract from the Community Development Block Grant Office in July of 1995. Three graduate students from the University of Illinois Department of Urban and Regional Planning were assigned to the Olivette Park Action Revitalization Plan under the supervision of Assistant Professor Kenneth Reardon. Work commenced in August of 1995 with initial informational meetings conducted with the Olivette Park Local Development Corporation and the East St. Louis Cultural Coalition. When initial efforts to involve neighborhood residents in the planning process through the OPLDC proved unsuccessful, the team enlisted the help of the Olivette Park Neighborhood Association in the early Fall of 1995. The president and vice-president of OPNA, which was then only six months old, expressed interest in building their organization to carry out the recommendations of the final plan. Ms. Mamie Bolden, president, and Mr. Rocco Goins, vice-president, were receptive to increasing the membership of the Olivette Park Neighborhood Association and using their monthly meetings to carry out and review planning activities. All residents of the Olivette Park neighborhood and community leaders were invited and encouraged to participate in the planning process. The planning team made every effort to involve a broad spectrum of committed individuals and groups. The OPLDC and the OPNA are both responsible for ensuring the success of the plan.

Purpose of the Plan

Building upon ESLARP's experiences in completing four other neighborhood plans in East St. Louis, the Olivette Park team identified three preliminary goals at the onset of the planning process. The following is a listing of the goals and a description of the methods used to achieve those goals.

Goal One To identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats in the Olivette Park neighborhood.

As outsiders to the community, the Olivette Park planning team could not easily obtain an accurate and complete picture of the neighborhood without the help of residents. Therefore, the planning team designed every data collection activity to include neighborhood participation, discussion, and review. In many instances, residents worked with students to gather the information about existing conditions, ensuring that the planning team obtained a complete and accurate picture of the study area. These data collection activities included:

1. Undertaking an initial assessment of neighborhood conditions through a “windshield survey” in which infrastructure, housing, and open space conditions were recorded and evaluated.
2. Collecting population, income, housing, and employment statistics for Olivette Park using 1970, 1980, and 1990 U.S. Census data.
3. Evaluating current land use, building conditions, site conditions, and local infrastructure conditions through a parcel-by-parcel physical inventory of the neighborhood.
4. Compiling resident, business owner, and social service provider opinions on current neighborhood conditions and future development priorities through personal interviews.
5. Investigating local ownership patterns to identify individuals and businesses responsible for dilapidated structures and deteriorated property conditions in the neighborhood.
6. Reviewing literature and archival materials pertaining to meaningful past planning efforts and municipal documents focusing on the Olivette Park neighborhood.

The most important data findings from these research activities are summarized in Chapter 2 of this report “Analysis of Strengths and Weaknesses.” A complete description of data collection methods used for *The Olivette Park Action Revitalization Plan*, as well as the survey instruments used, is included in the appendix of this report. A complete presentation of all data collected during the planning process can be found in the companion volume of this report, *The Olivette Park Databook*.

Goal Two To involve neighborhood residents, community leaders, business people, and social service providers in developing a comprehensive stabilization and development plan that builds on the neighborhood's strengths in order to attack the area's most pressing problems.

In order to create a plan that reflects the desires of the neighborhood, strong efforts were made to involve all facets of the community. The Olivette Park planning team used CDBG funding and its University resources to mail letters and press releases announcing the planning process and utilized student volunteers to go door-to-door to invite residents to meetings and events. Student volunteers also attended neighborhood church services and passed out information about the planning activities. In addition, business owners and social service providers who expressed interest in the neighborhood organizations were put on the mailing list and called about monthly meetings. These outreach efforts encouraged a broad cross section of the neighborhood to participate in *The Olivette Park Action Revitalization Plan*. On average, 20 to 25 people attended the monthly neighborhood association meetings throughout the planning process. During the 10-month planning process, approximately 200 residents, business owners, social service providers, pastors, and local government officials provided input on the plan.

The climax of the planning process was the Olivette Park Neighborhood Summit, held at the Grand Marais Conference Center at Frank Holton State Park on February 10, 1996. Residents and business leaders teamed up with student volunteers to knock on doors and pass out fliers as part of an extensive outreach strategy prior to the summit. Several media outlets also carried information about the summit, including the East St. Louis Monitor, the East St. Louis Daily News, and the Belleville News Democrat. In all, 70 people - including residents, city officials, business people, church leaders and social service providers - came together at the summit to establish the neighborhood's priorities in the areas of housing, economic development, cultural resource development, environmental improvement, youth development, and crime prevention. The priorities, programs, and activities identified during the neighborhood summit form the core of *The Olivette Park Action Revitalization Plan*. The six initiative chapters of this report are organized around those topical areas and recommend several steps for implementing and funding programs.

Goal Three To assist neighborhood residents in building a strong neighborhood coalition with sufficient organizational capacity and membership necessary to carry out the comprehensive plan.

As stated above, efforts were made from the outset to involve a broad cross section of people in the planning process. However, ESLARP has found that to sustain community interest, some small projects should be carried out in conjunction with the comprehensive planning process. Such projects offer an opportunity for a neighborhood organization to build the confidence of its members and establish credibility in the community. Such projects were carried out while completing *The Olivette Park Revitalization Plan*. In the fall, residents and students worked together to board up a dangerous house at 19th and Belmont streets, mow and clean the Bolden Community Garden, and clean the inside and outside of the Katherine Dunham Dynamic Museum. In the spring, the environmental improvement committee sponsored a clean-up of 15th Street, which was plagued with illegally dumped trash and overgrown plant materials. The clean-up was held on April 26 and 27, and 25 people participated throughout the weekend. The culmination of this successful neighborhood clean-up weekend was an open house at the Katherine Dunham Dynamic Museum, sponsored by the cultural resources committee. Over 70 people attended the event, including Mayor Gordon D. Bush.

The initiatives recommended in this plan are presented in order of difficulty. The first projects in each section are the easiest to implement, requiring few resources other than time and volunteers. The second, third and fourth projects listed require more organizational resources and funding. The last project listed in each section is intended to be a long-term project, requiring substantial volunteer, organizational, and monetary resources. The varying levels of difficulty of projects will enable the neighborhood association to build upon several small, successful activities before attempting long-term, complex projects. This will increase the confidence of members and enhance the credibility of the organization. It will also challenge the neighborhood association to constantly seek to recruit new members to complete bigger projects. Recommendations for increasing the organizational capacity of the Olivette Park Neighborhood Association are presented in the implementation chapter of this plan. In addition, the University has committed funding from a U.S. Department of

Housing and Urban Development grant it received to provide technical assistance to the neighborhood association for at least one more year.

Description of the Plan

This report represents a 10-month effort by Olivette Park residents, business owners, church leaders, social service providers, and University of Illinois students and staff. More specifically, it details the strengths and weaknesses of the neighborhood through the use of supporting data and resident perceptions. This plan also identifies six areas of need determined by residents and recommends specific projects and programs to address those needs.

¹ Young, Dina M. *Where We Live: East St. Louis*. Missouri Historical Society: 1994. p.1.

² Ibid, p.1.

³ Baldwin, Carl R. "East St. Louis History," in *History of St. Clair County, Illinois*, Vol. II. Comp. by St. Clair County Genealogical Society, Dallas, Tex: Curtis Media Corp., 1992. p.26.

⁴ *East St. Louis 20/20: A Strategic Vision for the Community's Future. Empowerment Zone Application.* p.2.

⁵ Reardon, Kenneth M. *The Winstanley/Industry Park Neighborhood Organization: Building Local Planning and Development Capacity in East St. Louis, Illinois.* p.2.

⁶ *East St. Louis 20/20: A Strategic Vision for the Community's Future. Empowerment Zone Application.* p.3.

⁷ Young, Dina M. *Where We Live: East St. Louis*. Missouri Historical Society: 1994. p.6.

⁸ *East St. Louis 20/20: A Strategic Vision for the Community's Future. Empowerment Zone Application.* p.3.

⁹ Ibid, p.V.

¹⁰ Ibid, p.V.

¹¹ Reardon, Kenneth M. *The Winstanley/Industry Park Neighborhood Organization: Building Local Planning and Development Capacity in East St. Louis, Illinois.* December, 1994. p.1-4.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Conversation with Damon Smith, Research Associate, East St. Louis Financial Advisory Authority. April 26, 1996.