

2001 LANSDOWNE REVITALIZATION PLAN

4.3 SWOT

The 2001 Neighborhood Revitalization Plan for the Lansdowne community is based specifically on input gathered in community meetings, answers given in fifty-five residential surveys, neighborhood conditions surveys, and the most recent available census data. Through these avenues, several issues of concern and possibility were examined to acquire a better understanding of how community residents perceive their neighborhood. During the February 20, 2001 Lansdowne neighborhood meeting, a SWOT exercise was completed by Lansdowne residents, with the assistance of university students present at that meeting. Through this exercise, the residents have identified several strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats that exist within their community. Many of the sentiments expressed in this exercise echoed what had been said in the residential surveys.

Strengths

A residential survey of 55 homes in the Lansdowne neighborhood yielded several residents' opinions about what they felt were the positive aspects of their neighborhood. During the SWOT exercise, the residents made several comments about existing strengths in their neighborhood that were expressed earlier in that survey. Throughout the exercise, people seemed to be very positive about three specific recreation opportunities -Kenneth Hall Park, the Jackie Joyner-Kersey Center, and the availability of youth centers to young people in the community. Many spoke of the close location of schools and the presence of churches as assets to the neighborhood. These institutions provided them with a strong sense of community. Several also mentioned that they were pleased with the neighborhood's garbage collection service as well as the public transportation provided by the metro and bus systems; this from a community where only a few years ago, municipal trash pick-up was non-existent because of local government funding problems. Additionally, meeting participants were glad that construction of new sidewalks as well as new housing development (both single family and condominiums) was taking place. As in the residential survey, most residents valued their neighborhood because it was a quiet and peaceful place to live.

Weaknesses

After discussing the strengths of their neighborhood, residents were then asked to give examples of the weaknesses, or negative aspects, of their community. The residents had the most to say

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about the state of infrastructure in their community. Many people complained about the poor condition of the streets because many of them are filled with potholes and hard to drive on. They mentioned a lack of sidewalks and street lighting along these streets, as well as improper labeling and signs. People were also concerned with speeding traffic on many neighborhood streets and felt that this was out of control because there are not enough school crossing and pedestrian signs. The lack of sidewalks has lead to children playing in the streets, which is extremely unsafe due to people driving at excessive rates of speed. Because there are few streetlights, there is an added danger for pedestrians walking in the street because of the darkness. In addition, the fact that there are few or no bus shelters is a real loss to the community, as many residents had said that the city's bus service was one of their greatest strengths. Flooding and poor drainage as well as bad sewage systems were also mentioned by many of the residents.

Opportunities

There were several areas of opportunity that were discussed during the SWOT analysis exercise by the residents. These areas include improving municipal services, promoting housing development and improvement, constructing additional cultural facilities, in addition to community parks and gardens, increasing more human capital investment practices, and encouraging economic development.

Creating jobs and business opportunities in the Lansdowne neighborhood, and more specifically in the East St. Louis area, is one of the most important concerns voiced by the residents. Appropriately, this concern needs attention because employment and income can be seen as the most critical indicators of ensuring an adequate standard of living for the residents within any society. The City of East St. Louis has been devastated by an array of social, economic, and political events. Since the 1960s, the city's economic base has been severely diminished with the loss of nearly 13,000 jobs. A substantial loss in retail activity and the subsequent loss of hundreds of businesses also occurred. Today, the City of East St. Louis experiences high rates of poverty and unemployment. Given these facts, the creation of jobs that provide a livable wage for residents is essential; however, enhancing the economic conditions within this area will not be an easy task.

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Moreover, having access to educational services and employment preparation skills is essential for individuals, if they are to become upwardly mobile and maintain a sustainable lifestyle. Human capital investment, whether formal or on the job training, enhances worker productivity and thus leads to higher wages. Opportunities for job training and employment assistance resources in the Lansdowne neighborhood and surrounding area are nearly non-existent. Therefore, if these services are created, the individuals receiving these services will benefit by accumulating more human capital and becoming more competitive in the labor market. The City of East St. Louis will benefit as well from the increasing productivity that results from a higher skilled work force.

Residents of Lansdowne need and expect safety, efficiency, and continuously improving municipal services. Construction of a fire station and police satellite were some possible opportunities mentioned by citizens. The development of these services would suggest that residents must have the earning potential to support the creation of these services through the local tax base. Given the minimal tax base in the area, purchasing power is subsequently limited and constrained economic activity also makes it difficult for local services to survive.

Accenting the landscape with community gardens and parks in Lansdowne was another opportunity recommended. Providing efficient and environmentally sensitive public services, which promote family-oriented neighborhoods as well as safe and attractive work environments, appears to be important to Lansdowne residents. Some people cited benefits of community gardens, including the following: saving money on food bills; building community spaces; eating more nutritiously than their non-gardening counterparts; creating neighborhoods with character and a sense of place.

Many residents in the Lansdowne area voiced encouragement for more housing developments. Creating new homes in the area attracts new renters and homeowners, but it also encourages a greater sense of ownership and community among present residents. The amount of vacant land, which is under both public and private control, offer great opportunity for the building of new affordable and mixed-income housing.

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Threats

Residents gave a range of challenges to improving the overall quality of their neighborhood. Some voiced that the lack of governmental intervention as a major problem for the Lansdowne neighborhood. The presence of dilapidated housing is a major concern. In fact, abandoned homes and overgrown lots with trash and weeds can be seen throughout the Lansdowne area. Moreover, rehabilitating the housing stock for present homeowners appears to be growing concern and issue for many residents. Present residents of Lansdowne expressed a desire to fix up their own homes, but many of these homeowners, however, do not have the financial means or physical strengths to do this work themselves. Private landowners, renters, and public agencies have left housing to sit abandoned-property owners do not keep rental property up to code and these structures deteriorate. Demolition of these abandoned and completely dilapidated structures has long been seen as a major threat to positive growth in East St. Louis. Demolition of these structures is difficult due to limited funding and enforcement staff, and the abundance of absentee landowners, who have no ties to the community. This makes it easy for them to let their property fall into disrepair.

Other concerns include the lack of code enforcement, poor street lighting, apathy of residents, poor police protection and discriminatory housing policies. The loss of tax base in the city of East St. Louis makes it very difficult for the city to maintain the current infrastructure. The poor condition of many streets and sidewalks in Lansdowne as well as sanitation service is a serious health and safety threat to the community. Many streets flood and have no “established” right-of-way area for pedestrians. The revitalization of Lansdowne will only occur if the current infrastructure can support new development. Poor streets make it difficult to bring construction vehicles in, and they will only worsen the already fair to poor condition of these streets. Developers look at infrastructure in deciding where to locate their development. The high cost of upgrading infrastructure and building new infrastructure is likely to discourage developers from locating in Lansdowne.

Conclusions

Much of the information obtained from the SWOT exercise is interrelated. Many of the strengths and weaknesses identified directly correspond with possible future improvements the community might attempt to undertake (opportunities). Similarly, many of the weaknesses, if left unchecked, may turn into more serious neighborhood problems (threats).

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Residents mentioned that they were pleased with new homes as well as sidewalks being constructed. This presents an opportunity for the community to create a new housing stock with quality infrastructure. But this development could also lead to further deterioration of other areas. If people begin to move from deteriorated rental housing into a new home that they own, it is likely that the rental property will remain empty and further deteriorate, creating a safety hazard and an eyesore for the community.

Community members were also grateful for the recreation opportunities that were available (i.e. parks, youth centers). In the future, it would be a good idea for Lansdowne residents to expand programs at these locations. When talking about the opportunities in their community, many people mentioned job training and employment assistance. If residents could organize this type of training in one of these venues, it would utilize an existing resource, and provide a much needed service to the area.

Many of these corollary relationships (between strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) can and should be seen as positive, and encourage residents to act on their ideas. However, they must also realize that if something is not done about neighborhood problems, they will worsen and have a greater negative impact within the neighborhood. For instance, if signage, lighting and street condition are not improved, both drivers and pedestrians will have a decreased sense of safety and security when traveling.

As stated before, this SWOT exercise has provided a great possibility for improvement for the Lansdowne neighborhood. Community residents, with the help of University of Illinois students, should focus on the issues of importance they have already identified and develop programs that best utilize Lansdowne's assets to achieve their goals. Action must be taken now to remedy neighborhood problems, so that they do not further threaten the health and safety of the community. If addressed correctly, these negative aspects could be improved upon and eventually become a source of community pride and accomplishment.

