

UNIVERSITY AT ALBANY

West Hill Neighborhood Conditions Assessment

Urban Community Development

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12/13/2012

Abstract

The West Hill neighborhood is one of the most troubled areas within the City of Albany in terms of crime, poverty, health issues, and abandoned housing. This study sought to initiate a discussion on ways to reverse course for the area by conducting a neighborhood assessment. Data of each property parcel within an approximate four block radius was inventoried. In the study area, 258 parcels were observed in the field and information recorded pertaining to their qualities and characteristics, such as land use, condition of the structure, and the condition of the area immediately surrounding the property. The data was later inputted in to the Comnet2Go.Org database for analysis. Our findings indicate that the foremost challenge confronting the community presently is how to remedy its vacant lot and abandoned building dilemma. We concluded that community groups such as the Arbor Hill Development Corporation could undertake several initiatives to assist the study area. These included utilizing community building techniques, economic development strategies, and neighborhood planning.

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Introduction

The boundaries of Team 1's study area contained the parcels within the following streets; Livingston Avenue to the north, south on Thornton Street to Clinton Avenue, east on Clinton to Henry Johnson Boulevard, and back north on Henry Johnson Boulevard to Livingston Avenue. The interior streets between Henry Johnson Boulevard and Thornton Street included 1st Street, 2nd Street, 3rd Street, Oak Street, and Swinton Street. The goal for conducting our assessment was to determine the condition of parcels within the study area. This would provide a more informed basis from which to provide recommendations for community development.

The rest of the paper begins with a "Setting the Context" section, which discusses why the neighborhood assessment of the built environment is important for urban community development. It analyzes how community assessments fit in with urban development paradigms and practices, as well as the pros and cons of conducting this type of study.

The next section addresses why the West Hill neighborhood was selected for our study. A variety of characteristics of the community are described, including data from the American Community Survey, and data pertaining to local crime, health, and school information. It also identifies the potential beneficiaries of the neighborhood assessment, including community partners such as the Neighborhood Association and the Arbor Hill Development Corporation.

This is followed by a presentation of the data collected and analyzed for the Team 1 study area. Each parcel is inventoried according to use, occupancy, or vacancy status. A variety of qualities were considered when assessing each property, such as the condition of the facade and side walls, presence of graffiti, and broken windows. The surroundings of the property were also observed, such as presence of garbage, the condition of the sidewalks, the presence of sneakers on wires, and vegetation overgrowth. This section includes an analysis of the limitations of our data.

The concluding section of the paper provides discussion and recommendations based on the current condition of the West Hill neighborhood. It provides short and long term goals that groups such as the Arbor Hill Development Corporation could undertake to improve the community. This includes utilizing community building techniques, neighborhood based

planning, and recommendations for the most effective economic development strategy to utilize going forward.

Setting the Context

Neighborhood assessments of the built environment are essential to effective community development strategies and practices. Mapping, assessing, and evaluating the built environment contributes to our understanding of the Community as defined in terms of “space.” Space can be defined by the built environment for living, working, and political organizing. Neighborhood assessments offer the opportunity to evaluate visible conditions of a community and identify trends and discrepancies. By using the proper indicators, we can effectively measure and evaluate a neighborhood in a very quantifiable way. Once a neighborhood assessment is completed, trends can be explained through the application of a particular paradigm. This will explain the problems within a larger context, which in turn will lead to a strategy to develop the entire community in a comprehensive and coherent manner.

In the Urban Competitiveness paradigm, community development can occur by increasing capital at the community level. It argues that the conditions of declining communities are a result of cities being unable to compete in a global economy. Cities become unable to attract the capital essential for growth and development, and are left behind (Porter 1995). One way to achieve this is through building infrastructure and improving the built environment. Under this model, urban neighborhoods with damaged buildings and streetscapes must invest capital to improve the space dimension of the community (Porter 1995). Urban competitiveness views investment in the built environment as a necessary step in the community development process. In this paradigm, community assessments of the built environment are absolutely critical because they can identify the problems that are contributing to the community’s inability to compete. Neighborhood assessments offer insight in to the strengths and weaknesses of a community and contribute to devising strategies to make it more economically competitive.

Neighborhood assessments can also provide valuable information to the three other paradigms. Assessments can signal declining social capital, demonstrate the impacts of financial disinvestment, and provide a spatial illustration of the concentration of poverty. However, each of these paradigms would require the use of additional information regarding the demographics of the community in order to go beyond assumptions and legitimize their approach.

The social capital paradigm argues that the built community is extremely relevant to the neighborhood because it provides important signals to a breakdown in social capital within the neighborhood. Social psychologists have identified a correlation between social disorder and crime, and damage to the built community; this has been referred to as the broken window theory (Wilson & Kelling 1982). The community development practices would not focus on the built environment as an end, but rather a means to rebuilding social order. To demonstrate a loss in social capital this assessment would need to be combined with additional information on neighborhood engagement and crime rates. The financial disinvestment paradigm of community development would explain damage to the built community as a result of policies that limited the community's access to financial investment. Finally, the concentration of poverty approach would use the data on foreclosures and damages as indicators of poverty, and highlight the concentration of these indicators (Goetz 2003). Again each of these paradigms would value the information regarding conditions of the built community, but would not specifically address them as a means to development. This is unlike the urban competitiveness model which would make direct investments in improving conditions within the built community as a means to increase its competitive edge and redevelop.

Community Development Practices

Community development practices are the actions that connect the paradigms to actual development. Practices include housing, safety, education, wealth creation and preservation, and public health. Each practice offers a mechanism for community development to take place in one specific area. Neighborhood assessments can play an important role by providing valuable information to shape the most effective practices.

The neighborhood assessment completed for the West Hill neighborhood will inform several key practices in the community. The identification of foreclosed and improperly boarded homes will assist in public safety efforts. This will also help to inform practices concerning housing. By gathering data on foreclosed and abandoned buildings we can develop a visual understanding of where problems exist within the community. Additionally, we can consider the overall conditions of the homes in the neighborhood and adopt strategies to improve or correct those problems. Practices involving public safety and housing may benefit most from the assessment completed in the West Hill neighborhood. This assessment provides details on

serious public safety and housing concerns that can now be quantified and addressed by the appropriate agencies.

Neighborhood Assessments: Pros and Cons

Neighborhood assessments of the built environment offer several advantages to community development. First they offer a mechanism for data collection, assessment, and evaluation. From this data, trends within a community can be identified and assessed, which in turn can shape how solutions are crafted. However, there are several limitations that will impact the usefulness of the results. The first limitation is that the indicators are exclusively oriented towards problems. This means that a great deal of information about the community is not being measured. Given the limited data, it requires looking at additional information to understand the larger context. Application of a paradigm forces us to assume a causal relationship between the social capital or economic condition, and the physical condition of the properties. Another challenge to the assessment data is how we characterized “problems”. In this scenario the residents of the community did not play an active role in identifying which items should be assessed based on their values. The number of shoes on a wire may present little value to the residents of the community. Similarly, the number of memorials and their characterizations as *problems* may be destructive to the community. The memorials may be an act of creating and exercising a level of agency within the community, perhaps even an example of empowerment.

Another challenge with this sort of assessment is that it is limited to the built environment. Comprehensive and coherent community development practices must be rooted in a broader range of assessments. The built environment can give us signals to deeper issues, but again, it requires making assumptions about relationships. The last major challenge with using a community assessment tool is the risk of choosing the wrong indicators. The value of this data relies on the assessor choosing the right indicators and ensuring that the right information is being collected and analyzed. If you are collecting the wrong information or you assume relationships exist between variables, the final analysis will be entirely inaccurate and will not further the community’s development.

Overall, the data collected in the West Hill community will provide details from which we can infer characteristics about the community. A concentration of damaged, foreclosed, and abandoned buildings may signal a decline in social capital and thus increased rates of social

disorder. The information will also provide information on the economic condition of the community, especially when combined with additional data. It is through the application of paradigms however that we are able to truly understand the meaning and value of the assessment data within the larger urban context.

Data Collection & Analysis

Methods

Table 1: Road Names/Address Ranges

Road Names	Address Ranges
Henry Johnson Blvd	121-196
Clinton Ave	326-413
Lexington Ave	4-32
Oak Street	2-18
Thornton Street	2-40
Livingston Ave	321-367
Swinton Road	1-43
1 st Street	246-304
2 nd Street	221-294
3 rd Street	218-273

The method used for this project was primary data collection via a neighborhood assessment. The study area includes the parcels outlined in Table 1. It shows the address ranges associated with the parcels assessed.

The data was collected on two consecutive Saturdays (November 3, 2012 & November 10, 2012). On November 3, 2012 data collection on the conditions of structures began on Clinton Avenue and continuing along Lexington Avenue and ended on 1st street. Weather conditions for the

day precluded further assessment and a second day of data collection was added.

On November 10, 2012 data collection began along 2nd Street, continued along Thornton Street, Livingston Avenue, to 3rd Street, then Oak Street to Swinton Avenue and ended along Henry Johnson Boulevard. Upon the completion of the data collection Team members divided the data sheets and individually entered the data. The data entry was completed on November 16, 2012. The data was entered into the Comnet2go system.

The Comnet2go system allows the data to be displayed and mapped by each problem condition. This allows conditions to be evaluated and displayed throughout the study area. Census data and school data was obtained for the surrounding area. Since the study area is small, the census data was evaluated at the Census Tract level. There are three schools in the surrounding area. The school report cards were used to evaluate school level data.

There are some limitations on the data collected and the data being used to describe the neighborhood. The study area is small and most data sets used to analyze the data are from large samples. There was limited access to parcel specific data within the study area. Parcel specific data is difficult to collect and, due to privacy concerns, can be difficult to obtain from other sources. The use of data at the census tract level can be helpful to establishing conditions about the greater West Hill neighborhood. However, using this data requires an assumption that conditions at the larger tract level are representative of our smaller study area. For that reason, the census tract data is unreliable.

As with all study data, the data collected here should be used with caution. The analysis should also be used with caution because it is very narrowly focused and could have error associated with it. The Comnet2go does have some limitation in the display of data that was collected. Also, assessing the severity of a problem is in the eye of the beholder; conditions may be deemed in worse shape by different surveyors.

The impact of alternate perspective is not addressed by this project. There is the assumption by residents that the analysis generated by this project will be used to improve conditions in the neighborhood. No commitment has been made by decision makers that the analysis generated here will be used at all to improve the conditions with the neighborhood. It is very possible that the municipal government will not be interested in the analysis and recommendation made from the findings of this project.

Analysis

Table 2: Land Use and Lot Counts

Land Use	Number of Lots	Percentage
Residential	185	72%
Vacant	52	20%
Commercial	8	3%
Community/Institutional/Public	8	3%
Mixed Uses	6	2%
Total	258	100%

The study area is composed of approximately 258 parcels. The land uses are shown in Table 2 below. The predominant land use is residential.



Figure 1: 191 Henry Johnson Blvd – Roy's Caribbean-Restaurant & Grocery

The commercial land uses are found along the major roadways with a few intermixed within the neighborhood. The Commercial properties and Mixed-Use properties are identified in Table 3. The neighborhood also has several community-institutional-public uses.

The inclusion of commercial uses within the neighborhood has both positive and negative effects. While it brings commerce to the neighborhood, some of the uses are unsightly, unhealthy, and dangerous. The sale and storage of cars negatively impacts the surrounding neighborhood. Some lots were used to store numerous old cars, or even as makeshift junkyards.

Table 3: Commercial/Mixed Uses within Study Area

Address	Business Name
239 Third St	MD Motor Car- car lot with storage
237 Third St	MD Motor Car- car lot with storage
235 Third St	
185 Henry Johnson BLVD	Roy's Caribbean Restaurant and grocery
Henry Johnson BLVD and First St.	Boulevard Grocery
Livingston Ave & Henry Johnson BLVD	Complex-Subway & Family Dollar
191 Henry Johnson BLVD	Taysha Florist
240 Third St.	Parking Area
179 Henry Johnson BLVD	Kenneth's Tastebuds Caribbean Restaurant
177 Henry Johnson BLVD	Kenneth's Tastebuds Caribbean Restaurant
353 Clinton Avenue	L&L Caribbean and American Cuisine
383 Clinton Avenue	Law Office of Michael Feit
397 Clinton Avenue	Business shut down
413 Lexington Avenue	Clinton Deli & Grocery

Prevalence of Problems



Figure 2: 354 and 356 Livingston Avenue

Of the total lots within the study area, 52 are vacant. This represents 20 percent of all the lots within the study area. This is a significant number. Table 4 outlines the basic conditions within the study area. Fifty-three percent of the buildings in the study area are occupied. Forty-six percent of the buildings in the study area are vacant.

Table 4: Basic Land Use Conditions within Study Area

Feature	Count
Buildings with No Problems	48
Vacant Lots	52
Occupied Buildings	93
Vacant Buildings	80
Other	33
Total Number of Lots	258



Figure 3: 251 Second Street

Nearly half of the buildings that are within the study area are vacant. If you add the number of vacant buildings to the number of vacant lots you get 132 lots where no one is living. That means that nearly 59 percent of neighborhood within the study area is uninhabited.

No Problems

Figure 5 shows the spatial distribution of buildings that had no identifiable issues or problems. There are a total of 48 buildings within the study area that were identified as having no problems. It was very common for these properties to be adjacent to either vacant homes or vacant lots. The lots with buildings identified as having no problems make up 27 percent of the total lots within the study area.

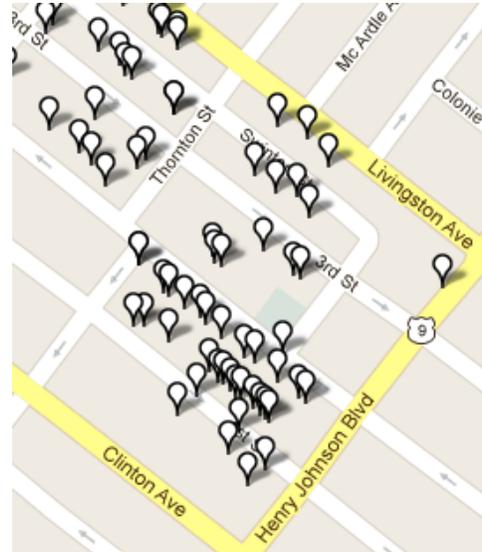


Figure 4: Buildings with No Problems

Occupied Buildings

Figure 5 below shows the spatial distribution of the occupied buildings within the study area. Table 5 below shows the prevalence of damage amongst occupied buildings. The most prevalent problem among occupied buildings was minimal damage to the façade. Twenty-three buildings suffered from more than one problem. The most common problem combination was a minimal damage façade or side wall and minimal damage to the stairs. The percentage of occupied buildings displaying two or more problems was approximately 25 percent.

Table 5: Damage Prevalence and Severity among Occupied Buildings

Problem	Minimal Damage	Moderate Damage	Extensive Damage	Percentage of Buildings Effectuated
Damaged Facade	41	8	1	44%
Peeling Paint	11	4	0	11%
Damaged Stairs	19	3	1	20%

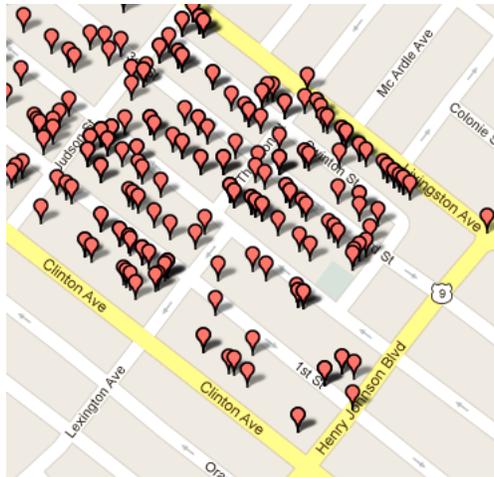


Figure 5: Occupied Buildings

Vacant Buildings

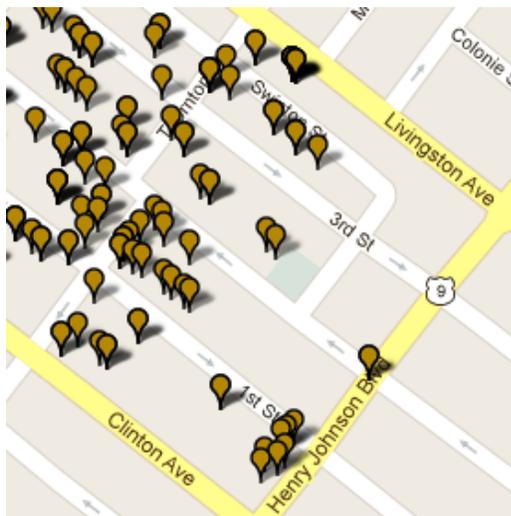


Figure 6: Vacant Buildings

Of the 80 vacant buildings in the study area, only five properties were identified as having no problems. Thirty of the 80 vacant buildings have some type of façade or sidewall damage, while 23 are not properly boarded. Table 6 shows the type and prevalence of damage to the façade or sidewall. Twenty-three buildings in the study area were not properly boarded. Figure 6 is a spatial representation of the distribution of vacant buildings. There are three clusters of vacant buildings; one along Lexington Avenue, another along Henry Johnson Boulevard, and a third along Swinton Street.

The largest cluster is along Lexington between 1st and 2nd Streets and the second largest is along Henry Johnson between 1st Street and Clinton Avenue.

Table 6: Prevalence of Damaged Facades & Sidewalls on Vacant Buildings

Problem	Minimal	Moderate	Extensive
Damage to façade or sidewall	13	8	9

Vacant Lots



Figure 7: Vacant Lots

Table 7 displays the severity and occurrence of problems within vacant lots. The study area has a total of 52 vacant lots. The greatest problem seems to be overgrowth within vacant lots, followed by trash. We did have one vacant lot that was being used as a seasonal farmer's market. This was a welcome change from the other uses that are common among the vacant lots which were junk yards, debris piles, and parking.

Figure 7 shows the spatial distribution of vacant lots. There are a number of areas where the vacant lots seem to cluster, however they can be found on every street. There are two large clusters one along Henry Johnson Boulevard and the other is between 1st and 3rd street in the center of the study area.

Table 7: Severity of Conditions of Vacant Lots

Problem	Minimal	Moderate	Extensive
Trash-filled	8	3	0
Overgrown	9	8	0
Trash filled & Overgrown	2	1	1

Sidewalk Conditions

While the road conditions are fair, some sidewalk conditions need to be addressed. Of the 258 lots assessed, 41 sidewalk conditions were identified. Sidewalk conditions where sections had been lifted or missing were deemed to be tripping hazards and in need of repair. Table 9 shows the breakdown of the sidewalk conditions. Figure 8 is a bar chart comparing the conditions by severity. Figure 9 shows the spatial distribution of the sidewalk conditions. The sidewalk conditions are most severe along the perimeter of the study area however there is a cluster of sidewalk problems between 2nd and 3rd streets.

Figure 8: Severity of Sidewalk Conditions

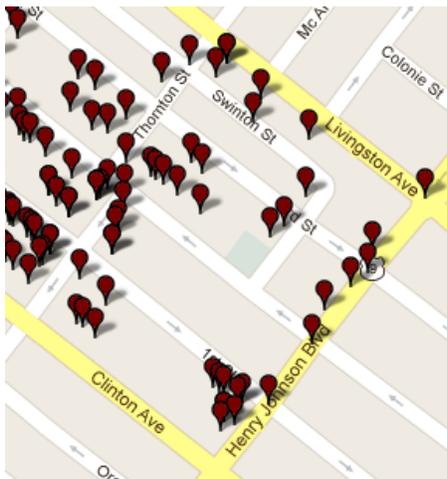
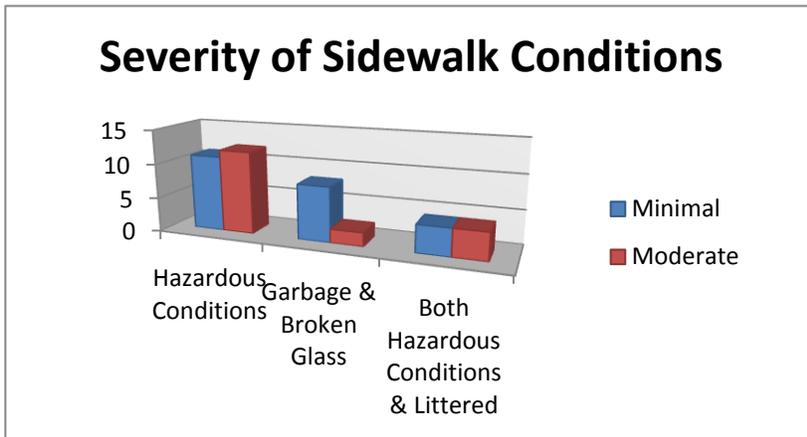


Figure 9: Sidewalk Conditions

Street Vegetation

There is a limited problem with street vegetation. It should be reiterated that our study was conducted in mid-November, which obviously impacts the amount of overgrowth present. Four instances were recorded. A far more prevalent issue was vegetation on the lots that was overgrown or where debris had been left. The street vegetation issues are clustered between 2nd Street and Swinton Street, with an outlier on Henry Johnson. The street vegetation issues range from minimal overgrowth to fallen limbs.

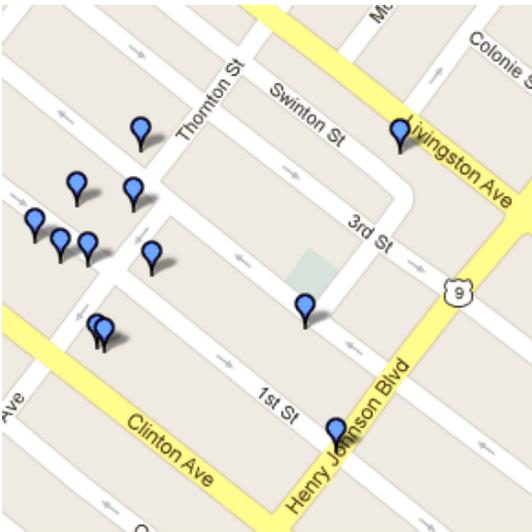


Figure 10: Graffiti/Scratchiti Prevalence

Graffiti/ Scratchiti

Observations indicated Graffiti and Scratchiti are not large problems; only 6 instances were recorded. The graffiti that was present was generally located on the front of buildings. Figure 10 shows the spatial distribution of the graffiti and scratchiti. The instances of graffiti and scratchiti are not clustered within the study area. Two of the instances are located next door to each other on Clinton Avenue, however the rest are distributed

throughout the study area. Thornton Street, 3rd Street, Oak Street, and Swinton Street had no instances of graffiti or scratchiti.

Sneakers Hanging on Lines

Sneakers hanging from power lines are not a prevalent problem; only two instances were recorded. Both instances occurred in close proximity to one another on 1st Street. In one instance, 4 pairs of sneakers were hanging from the wires. This is a hazardous condition and should be addressed by the power company.

Problem Clusters

There are areas where problems are clustered. When vacant lots are overlaid with vacant buildings, large clusters of vacant properties can be identified. Nearly 59 percent of the properties within the study area are uninhabited. The West Hill / Arbor Hill Neighborhood have an even greater problem with vacancy. Property values are low in areas where vacant buildings and other hazardous conditions are prevalent. The lack of maintenance of properties contributes to a greater number of vacancies. So the question is; what should be done?

Easily Addressed Problems

Some of the easiest problems to address are sidewalk conditions and street vegetation overgrowth. This will not only improve the aesthetics of the neighborhood, but protect the power lines from damage as a result of inclement weather. This requires support from the utility

company. The utility company should be notified of sneakers hanging from power lines so they can be removed. They should also assess whether trees need to be trimmed to reduce interference with power lines.

Severe Problems

The more severe problems are related to vacancy and not properly board buildings. The City should partner with the neighborhood and other non-profit corporations to identify salvageable vacant structures that can be renovated and returned to the housing stock, and those that should be demolished. While this will result in more vacant lots, it will improve the quality of life for many residents. While in the neighborhood several instances of broken, second story glass were observed, which is obvious a hazardous condition for all residents.

The long term disinvestment that is occurring in the neighborhood is a tricky problem. It will require municipal leaders willing to work with area residents to invest in the neighborhood and improve conditions. Some investment is occurring in some of the vacant buildings within the study area but it remains to be seen whether those structure being remodeled will be completed.

The vacant lots within the neighborhood are as much an opportunity as a deterrent. The City should partner with civil organizations and neighborhood residents to clean up these lots. A program for removal of debris and trash could prepare these lots for either pocket parks or community gardens. The neighborhood could benefit greatly if some of the vacant lots were converted to community gardens or enhanced and left as community open spaces. There were several areas within the study area where a group of contiguous lots were open and just waiting for cleanup and another use to be established.

Discussion & Recommendations

Current conditions in the West Hill neighborhood reflect decades of disinvestment and depopulation. Of the 258 parcels in our study area, 59 percent were either vacant or contained abandoned buildings. The area as a whole is one of Albany's poorest. Consequently, residents exceed the expected hospital admission percentage for their population by 127 percent, 26 percent, and 80 percent for diabetes, circulatory problems, and respiratory issues, respectively. Any community development strategy needs to consider these realities in order to devise attainable and realistic goals which are specially crafted to address the needs of the

community. Revitalization will most likely be slow and may involve effects which are intangible. However, such efforts are critical to ensuring that the residents of the West Hill neighborhood can enhance their quality of life and provide a better set of circumstances for the next generation. While any successful redevelopment effort requires a significant effort by the citizens of the West Hill neighborhood, government at all levels need to provide the necessary assistance to help change the direction of the area. The most effective next steps for the Arbor Hill Development Corporation involve community building exercises, initiating community-based planning, and utilizing the correct economic development strategies.

Community Building Exercises

While the prevalence of derelict buildings and vacant lots deter investment, intransigent problems related to crime, health, lack of opportunities, and poor education are the major impediments to real economic revitalization in the area. However, such deep-seated problems can begin to be addressed using community building techniques based around redeveloping the built-environment. As noted earlier in the paper, vacant lots can represent an opportunity as much as a detriment. One way to envision vacant lots as an opportunity is for them to serve as a catalyst for developing social capital. Community groups such as the Arbor Hill Development Corporation could organize neighborhood events to clean vacant lots. Its first task can involve identifying vacant lots to be cleaned. The project area may be as large as an entire block, or as small as an individual lot. There were a few locations in our study area where multiple vacant lots were strung together; this also is a potential starting point. Latex gloves, garbage bags, and grabbers would be provided to participants.

As a tactic to attract people, food should be served at the conclusion of the cleanup. “Community building does not start in meetings. It starts - typically - with eating and talking” (Traynor 2012, pg 217). Hand washing soap or sanitizer would be distributed at the conclusion of the clean-up to those who participated. Healthy food could be served, as well as information disseminated about the advantages of eating healthy, where healthy foods can be accessed, and healthy recipes (which can be the food served at the event). The fact that the lot may become littered with trash once again does not make the operation fruitless; the real benefit will be in the social connections people with one another. Obviously, one such event will not suffice to change the course of the entire neighborhood. However, the social capital developed at events such as these can be utilized to achieve greater objectives.

The vacant lot clean-up program should be initiated early in the spring so as to build momentum throughout the summer and fall months. As winter approaches, the community group should begin to organize meetings around discussing more pressing issues the community faces. Hopefully, the community building techniques will have paid off and neighbors encourage one another to attend meetings. Perhaps some of the issues discussed at the meeting have already surfaced in conversations amongst people participating in the vacant lot clean-up program. At first, objectives should be targeted at relatively short-term, attainable goals, such as making the utility company remove sneakers hanging from wires, or having the city patch up sidewalks to make them more safe for pedestrians. Taking the low-hanging fruit first will enhance the reputation of the community group as not only a positive force in the community, but also a winning group.

Assessing the appropriate time to utilize either consensus or confrontational/competitive strategies “to increase community civic capacity, depends on using the right approach at the right time, in the right place, and with the right people” (Saegart 2012, pg 226). After claiming some initial victories, sights can be set on addressing more critical issues facing the community, such as abandoned buildings. The West Hill neighborhood is strategically placed due to its proximity not only to the city’s government headquarters, but also the county’s and the state’s. Using community organizing tactics, residents could hold a protest calling attention to the abandoned building problem in their neighborhood, as well as the desire to have a land bank. To make the protest more personable, each resident would have a picture of an abandoned building in their neighborhood. Research on the history of property ownership of each building pictured would demonstrate how the current system of dealing with abandoned properties is a detriment to the community.

A Neighborhood Plan

In conjunction with a land bank, the Arbor Hill Development Corporation needs to advocate the city to allocate resources to develop a neighborhood plan for the area. While most may agree that abandoned housing, crime, and need for jobs are the most pressing concerns of the community, a plan would provide ways in which the community could overcome those problems. Residents would be able to envision how they would like their community to look in the future, which may contribute to greater citizen participation or neighborhood pride. With the aid of a plan, community groups could make stronger arguments for funding particular projects

to city, county, and state officials. This would sharpen the focus of groups acting within the community by identifying assets, but also potential areas for group collaboration.

Economic Development Strategy

Conducting community building exercises based upon improving the built environment can produce tangible results for the community. However, it is difficult to assess how traditional economic development strategies would work in the West Hill community. The lack of accessible economic opportunity in the area is linked with poor educational attainment and lack of expendable incomes. Residents do not have well-paying jobs because they have low educational attainment and consequently lower incomes. They also lack accessible jobs because businesses are deterred from locating there because they do not have a sufficient market to sustain themselves. Most businesses currently located in the area are either restaurants or corner markets. Jobs associated with these industries have a high displacement share, meaning that to favor one establishment over another would likely result in negligible job growth. “For example, to use incentives for a barbershop to remain open would likely put another barbershop out-of-business or at the very least, at a financial disadvantage” (Figarsky 2012). Consequently, an economic development strategy based on business retention would not have a profound impact on the community.

The most effective economic development strategy would involve ameliorating the built environment while providing employment in the area with an incentive package for those employees to buy homes in the neighborhood. Here again, abandoned or vacant properties can represent an opportunity rather than a detriment to the community. The Arbor Hill Development Corporation could form a business venture in partnership with the city, an industrial development agency (IDA), and a community development financial institution (CDFI) that demolishes, rehabs, deconstructs, and constructs housing. The distinguishing feature of this business entity would be that a substantial percentage of its employees would be hired from the neighborhood it served. In order to ensure an adequate labor pool from which to hire, the IDA could fund a school to train construction workers. Tuition to the school, however, would not be free; interested residents would need to take out a loan. Although not mandatory, a CDFI such as the Community Loan Fund of the Capital Region could offer low interest loans, as well as guidance about repayment options and ways to improve credit history. The Arbor Hill Development Corporation would be in charge of gathering funds or grants to build or renovate homes. With

the aid of a land bank, the city (or county) could coordinate with the business to ease the development process, such as providing abandoned properties at minimal or no cost to the business entity. Completed projects could be offered to successful graduates of the construction program at a discounted price. Again, the business could offer low interest loans to qualified individuals to facilitate home ownership in the area.

The current circumstances in the West Hill neighborhood are dire; however, community development is not impossible. Residents and community stakeholders still exist who want to better the area, and as long as this is the case, hope for a brighter day still has potential to re-emerge. Utilizing community building strategies can result in greater political (and perhaps resource) capacity for the Arbor Hill Development Corporation. A neighborhood plan would sharpen the focus and resolve of community stakeholders, as well as produce more effective programs by the city, county, and state entities. A business entity which trains construction workers from the community and improves the built environment is the most effective and sensible economic development strategy available to the West Hill neighborhood.

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