Abstract

This document reviews comprehensive plans from various sources as well as facts from the field to recommend a general strategy for adding value to Southwest Detroit neighborhoods through an overarching theme of green infrastructure to make each neighborhood more livable and more sustainable. Specific projects are included as recommended steps towards facilitating this general strategy. The recommended projects include:

- Intensive landscaping of major streets
- Development of plazas and other welcoming features at each of Southwest Detroit’s major focal points
- Greenways connecting our neighborhoods
- Rebuilding of old parks and creation of new parks
- Other green features and initiatives that result in a consistently green image and reality for Southwest Detroit neighborhoods

Each of the communities of the Southwest Detroit Development Collaborative have recommended projects within this report.

This Green Infrastructure Project Report was developed by Urban Neighborhood Initiatives in the year 2009, principally by staff members Dennis Nordmoe, Britt Zimmerman, Matthew Nahan, and Anna Callis.
Preface

This project was made possible through support from the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) with the interest and guidance of Deborah Younger, Program Director, and Victor Abla, Relationship Manager. The advocacy of the Southwest Detroit Development Collaborative (SDDC), Kristine Miranne, Executive Director, brought this resource commitment to our area and agency.

All of the SDDC agencies have in some way or another demonstrated over the years their commitment to developing and respecting the environment of our part of the City, and in the process, have demonstrated their capacity to create and manage the development of green infrastructure. Greening of Detroit continues to be a major resource for neighborhood tree planting projects. Southwest Detroit Environmental Vision is an extraordinary advocate for environmental protection and improvement. An emerging organization, the Congress of Communities of Southwest Detroit, has already begun to provide counsel from a neighborhood-by-neighborhood point of view.

The Detroit Recreation Department’s Strategic Master Plan is a major resource in building an agenda for improvement of park resources for Southwest Detroit neighborhoods and Tim Karl of that department has been helpful through many aspects of our work as has Todd Scott of the Michigan Trails and Greenways Alliance in connection with his staff support of the Greenways Coalition and the work of the Greenways Initiative of the Community Foundation of Southeast Michigan.

Britt Zimmerman, MLA, has made enormous contributions to this project in the areas of GIS mapping analysis, park and landscape design, and editing. Matthew Nahan contributed invaluable editing assistance. Anna Callis contributed research support and Amanda Holiday, MSW, contributed community organization assistance.

Whatever the limitations of this paper (which are my responsibility), it comes at an opportune time when, through a confluence of events, the community is looking for a vision to guide future development. Among those events are the following:

- The Sustainable Detroit Assessment Team’s report addressing options for redevelopment of a shrinking city
- An economic crisis bringing about change in priorities for community development from production of housing to adding value to neighborhoods
- The potential impact of major transportation investments providing both challenge and opportunity for the development of Southwest Detroit
- A change in vision on the part of funding resources from program support to commitment to the creation of healthy neighborhoods

On behalf of my agency, Urban Neighborhood Initiatives, and its Board and staff, I express our appreciation at being allowed to make this contribution, whatever its limitations, to the development of a vision for a greener, more verdant, and healthier Southwest Detroit.

Dennis Nordmoe
November 2009
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Introduction

The purpose of this project is to create a vision for multiple development projects that will move Southwest Detroit forward as a model community for sustainable living in the urban environment and as an outstanding community for family life. The project creates an agenda using several forms of green infrastructure for community development that will add value to every neighborhood as well as to the Southwest area as a whole. The added value will have several dimensions:

- Quality of life, improving the aesthetic experience of life and offering opportunities for developing a healthier lifestyle
- Sustainable lifestyles in image and reality
- Improved social conditions as a consequence of neighborhood stability and better youth development outcomes
- Improved property values

By green infrastructure, we refer to a range of development options including:

- Greenways
- Neighborhood recreational parks
- Specialized regional parks
- Plazas for prominent “focal point” public spaces
- Green buffers
- Community gardens
- Arboretums and wildlife habitats
- Urban agriculture, including farms, apiaries, and orchards
- Fields of natural grasses and flowers
- Attractively landscaped secure industrial parks
- Green alleys with permeable paving
- Energy-efficient homes and businesses

This report takes seriously the implications of Detroit’s shrinking population that has produced an abundance of vacant land and a devaluation of existing housing. It proposes ways of using this vacant land that will add value to those neighborhoods that remain viable. In terms of strategic thinking in relation to the shrinking city, land use may be thought of in two categories:

- Uses of emerging vacant land within viable communities
- Positive uses of large masses of vacant land in formerly viable communities

This report will move from abstract analysis to note specific development opportunities throughout southwest Detroit and offer tools to support making those development opportunities proposal-ready.

The present status of Southwest Detroit

Discussion of the shrinking character of Detroit is often tied to images of large swaths of vacant land where neighborhoods have disappeared. This will be discussed later because it is a reality, but there is another reality within the neighborhoods that remain viable and even those that are growing. As housing ages and is subject to the vicissitudes of decay, neglect, and arson, vacant lots and groups of vacant lots come to be scattered throughout our older neighborhoods. This scattered vacant land should be viewed as a potential resource for adding luxury, creativity, beauty and function to our neighborhoods in ways that were not possible only a few years ago when every available lot was occupied in some form.

It is the strong position of this paper that in fill housing should be considered only after we have ruled out other uses of the land that will add value to the neighborhood. After all, many sections of Detroit were overbuilt in
an era when the primary and unquestioned goal was to pack as many families into as small a space as possible. This made sense for developers whose goal was to maximize profit and also made possible the positive side of dense development in the past era: walkable access to work, transportation by streetcar to anywhere in the city, parishes that had beautiful churches and strong schools, and neighborhood shopping strips to serve the daily needs of the community.

Now the needs of our communities are different and land that has become vacant is a resource for correcting past planning errors and addressing current social problems. The number one need within our community is the reduction of crime. A second issue is the restoration of value to residential property in the community where median home prices are now under $20,000. Key contributors to a solution will be:

- Community resources that make our young people feel valued and that socialize them into positive roles in their community
- Physical alterations to our communities so that creative, prospering people see our neighborhoods as high-value locations where they will want to put down roots, exercise leadership and stay for long periods of time, setting high normative standards for community behavior and aspirations
- Adding value to our neighborhoods so that all families feel strong bonds of loyalty and become committed to staying in the neighborhood for decades, which in turn will build social webs that involve accountability structures
- Reducing the scale of our neighborhoods so that the focal points are no longer only huge regional parks and massive high schools and parish churches where no one is expected to know everybody’s name -- circumstances of anonymity and lack of intimacy that contribute to the demand for informal intimacy groups, such as gangs, to develop -- and reformatting the neighborhoods to be clustered around smaller gathering points where in fact people do become acquainted with each other such as community gardens, neighborhood parks, community sports leagues and neighborhood-based schools that function also as community centers

Appearances on Entering the Community

Southwest Detroit does have streets that are lined with trees, built-up with attractive single-family homes. However, the casual visitor’s first impressions to the contrary may be lasting. Many of our entry points to the community such as Livernois St. and West and South Fort St., and lesser arteries such as Central St. bring the visitor through blocks and blocks of bleak postindustrial landscape. It will be difficult to rebrand Southwest Detroit as a green community without in reality greening up our entry points. We must develop bold plans to make our major points of entry into paths of beauty that will convey a clear impression that one is entering a vital, sustainable community.

Edge Issues throughout the Community

The legacy of a time when Detroit did not have a zoning master plan are still with us in the form of industrial properties scattered throughout the community directly adjacent to residential properties. In most cases, the undesirability of this becomes clear through deterioration and even disappearance of housing adjacent to those industrial sites. Green infrastructure offers ways of resolving edge issues. A few examples are illustrated in this paper. Every community development corporation (CDC) is challenged to identify additional locations for this treatment.

Social Needs and the Current Distribution of Resources

Southwest Detroit is blessed with several major parks and a few well-placed neighborhood parks. The high visibility of some of these parks such as Clark, Kemeny and Patton mask the absence of parks within walking distance of much of our growing population of young people. Changed social conditions mean that children, even teens are not allowed to get on a bicycle and ride a half-mile or more to a large park or to feel safe once they get there. We have many dense neighborhoods which have no parks at all, let alone parks within the quarter-mile distance normally viewed as the service area of a neighborhood park. This paper will present maps showing the distribution of population in relation to the distribution of parks.
Pollution Issues, Air, Land, and Water
The industrial history of Southwest Detroit has left it with a well-known and unwelcome legacy of pollution. Both stationary and mobile sources of air pollution impact some areas heavily much of the time and all areas at least occasionally. Brownfields abound often with unknown levels of pollution. The fact that they are left open to trespass presents a danger to health. Their visual impact pulls down surrounding property values. Meanwhile the region as a whole is under mandate to resolve water quality issues related to the original design of our sewer systems that have combined provisions for the handling of storm water with sanitary sewers. To be a community of good citizens with a consistently green ethic and image, Southwest Detroit should take all steps possible to reduce the water equivalent of our carbon footprint by reducing the amount of storm water entering the sewer system, especially from such potentially polluting sources as parking lots and alleys.

Property Values and the Formation of Family Wealth
Historically in our country, homeownership has been a step toward generation of family wealth. Southwest Detroit homeowners have experienced sharp reductions in their net worth as a result of national economic trends. This loss has been particularly sharp here because of the surplus of housing in Detroit -- a by-product of both reduction in employment and the level of crime in the city.

To remake this into an area where once again low income people can purchase a home, improve it, and see their net worth steadily increase as a result, we will have to add value to the location. Improving the green infrastructure of the community can contribute to the formation of family wealth by improving the value of properties.

Excess Land for Population
It is now well recognized that the city of Detroit as a whole has an abundance of land way out of proportion to its remaining population. Southwest Detroit, as a renowned viable community has the opportunity to demonstrate how surplus land can be repurposed to enhance the value of the properties that remain useful and to improve the quality of life for all its citizens.

Locational Advantage and Marketing Potential
Chicago flourishes because of locational advantage at the intersection of trade routes and transportation systems. So too, successful neighborhoods also flourish because of locational advantages. The original locational advantage that Southwest Detroit possessed was that low income residents could enjoy homeownership at a reasonable price while being very close to their jobs and investing very little in transportation, literally at the level of nickels and dimes.

Local industry has largely disappeared as a source of employment and our neighborhoods have become bedroom communities for residents who now often work in the suburbs. However, our community still has locational advantages:

- At the intersection of rail, freeway, port and international transit, we are one of two centers of logistics for Southeast Michigan, the other being Metropolitan airport. As DRIC and DIFT project stake shape, new logistical opportunities should evolve within, and very near our communities. If our neighborhoods are perceived as high-value communities, we would stand to gain population from people attracted to these new sources of employment.
- We are very close to whatever employment opportunities evolve in downtown Detroit making Southwest Detroit an ideal residential location for the person or family wishing to be a part of the urban experience and economy without contributing to global warming through excessive expenditures on transportation.

There is the potential for our vacant industrial sites to be revived as a locations for clean industry as a new clean energy economy emerges making this once again a place where people can walk or ride a bike to work -- an ideal element of a sustainable lifestyle.
Redensification of the community through in fill housing will become desirable and valuable as land use is re-purposed for support of a high-quality, sustainable lifestyle. This will become a community to which people move as less desirable neighborhoods implode. This will also become a community of choice for suburban and urban residents who desire as a matter of ethics and pride to live in a sustainable and diverse urban neighborhood.

**Components in Greening Southwest Detroit**

**Entry and Focal Points**

Major focal points of community design such as prominent intersections or transition points between communities are given special treatment in many urban plans. These points provide opportunity to enhance the identity and to project an image of a community. Grand Circus Park and Campus Martius are two well known examples in Detroit. Focal points may have statuary or geometrically shaped objects such as pylons, trees, or ornamental gardens at the center of those focal points. These decorative micro parks or plazas serve to project an image of vitality and beauty to the communities where they serve as key transition points.

**Green buffers**

We will use the term “green buffers” to designate trees and other plantings inserted into the urban landscape with the specific goal of cleansing the air of dust and other pollutants, reducing the impacting of storm-water runoff on water quality, providing habitat for wildlife, reducing temperatures and wind, and increasing shade and property values. Green buffers are generally applied as site-specific tools for environmental improvement in areas of poor environmental quality. Specific scientific information as to appropriate plantings will be emerging from separate studies at Greening of Detroit and Southwest Detroit Environmental Vision.

A mature green buffer in the form of thick linear tree plantings also helps to resolve edge issues providing a pleasant visual screen between residential and industrial areas. Buffers can add value to neighborhoods in two ways: although cleansing of the air can have profound environmental value which will be recognized by some buyers, other buyers may be more immediately impressed by the aesthetic contribution of buffers.

Green buffers can exist either independently of transportation arteries or in combination with either a green streets program or greenways. Given that southwest Detroit is particularly burdened by the mixing of industrial and residential land uses, judicious and creative use of green buffers can diminish the debilitating effects of industrial properties on adjacent or near-adjacent residential neighborhoods. Our recommendation is that we give special attention to heavily polluted areas as well as boundary areas between residential neighborhoods and industrial sites.

**Green Streets**

We define “Green Streets” as a program for improving the experience of traversing into and between Detroit neighborhoods along its major streets and arteries by blending safety and beautification practices to create streets that have some of the functions of Green Buffers. These streets can become a part of the green infrastructure network through tree planting and other landscaping on berms, curb extensions, pedestrian islands, boulevards and traffic circles. Developed in this way, streets will not only give a green image to the community, becoming advertisements for the quality of life in the neighborhoods behind them, but also double as green buffers that help to cleanse the air. Further, when developed in a way so as to calm and slow traffic, they can make transportation both more efficient and safer for the community as a whole, further adding value to residential neighborhoods. Applying the “greenway/buffer treatment” can have a significant impact on the perceived quality of life for the community with consequences for property values. The potential advantages of a quadruple benefit (aesthetic, air-quality, safety, and community property values) should not be taken lightly.

**Greenways**

Greenways are a popular technique for urban greening which can take a variety of forms. Some greenways are non-motorized pathways that are beautifully landscaped and utilized by walkers, runners, and bikers. Other
greenways are streets with intensive landscaping and bike paths. However, streets can have bike paths without being greenways in this sense and this adds to confusion. Streets with bike paths are sometimes included in greenway plans on the apparent grounds that they offer non-motorized (“green”) transportation. What is generally conveyed by the term is that greenways offer ways of getting from point A to point B in a clean and aesthetically pleasing atmosphere with generous amounts of greenery that soften the harshness and barrenness of most urban streets.

Greenways can serve several functions. They can provide an alternative method of moving about the region by bicycle or on foot. As highly attractive and beautifully landscaped routes, they can actually attract people from surrounding areas to explore our part of the city. Their attractiveness can actually add value to the neighborhoods that surround them. By intensively landscaping these greenways with trees and other plants, they can help to cleanse the air. They can help to build social bridges between neighborhoods, many of which have distinctive ethnic populations. Greenways can also draw attention to outstanding community resources such as the waterfront and historic sites.

Greenways can be corridors of open and natural space that both protect the natural environment and provide benefits to the human populations that surround them. In urban areas, they can enrich the habitat and diversity of otherwise absent animals and plants, mimic the natural landscape, and create cleaner air and water thereby improving the health of the residents. Greenways promote inter-connectedness of residents across neighborhoods, and create a stronger connection between residents and their natural surroundings. A greenway crossing or bordering an urban neighborhood will improve residents’ quality of life, raise the property values of nearby homes, and stimulate economic development. By encouraging a more positive outlook on the neighborhood and larger community, potential residents might be attracted from other neighborhoods which will benefit local commercial strips.

Parks

The redevelopment and repositioning of parks in Southwest Detroit can add value to the community in several ways. They become focal points for residential investment and redevelopment. They provide opportunities for additional tree planting and landscaping. They provide opportunities for exercise by adults and healthy recreation by children. They contribute to the strengthening of social networks at the neighborhood level making people feel more comfortable and safe in their own community.

Micro Uses of Vacant Land

If we view vacant lots simply as future home sites and leave them vacant indefinitely, they can become a blight on the community. However, we can also define them as opportunities to add value to current residences by assisting homeowners to convert them into side lots for gardening and other purposes. There are multiple other ways of redeveloping small plots of land to add value to the community which we will explore further.

Major Uses of Vacant Land

Some parts of Southwest Detroit have become failed neighborhoods in which burned-out vacant lots predominate. Rather than let these areas remain as monuments to failure, we propose that new uses be found for this land which will add value to the surrounding communities. Normally, this will not be housing as housing is already in abundant supply. Therefore we will look to land-intensive uses that would have been unthinkable a few decades ago such as:

- adding amenities to adjacent residential neighborhoods through dog parks, athletic fields, wildflower parks and natural habitats
- adding employment in an ecologically responsible way such as with vegetable or fruit and nut farms or other kinds of agricultural product development, such as aquaculture or other animal-based products. This merits further exploration into rezoning for such purposes.
- Suburban-style gated, landscaped industrial parks may be another option for jobs creation.
As a side note, urban forests are often mentioned in lists such as these as uses for large areas of vacant urban land. A true urban forest complete with canopy and undergrowth and associated habitat would be open to exploitation for criminal activity and would be difficult to patrol adequately. Therefore it is not recommended for serious consideration.

**Green Alleys**

Most of Southwest Detroit is laid out in such a way that homeowners must use alleys to access their garages since their lots are too narrow for the use of side driveways. Some alleys were never paved and during wet seasons, driving through puddles with uncertain bottoms can be quite unnerving. Many alleys were paved but have not been maintained. Today, these have massive potholes or are deteriorated beyond repair.

These alleys present an attractive development opportunity when paired with the green alley technology developed in other cities. This is a method of paving that allows water to permeate through the pavement and thus does not contribute to contamination of waterways by overburdening sewage systems during storms. Creating green alleys can thus add value in two ways to our neighborhoods: by making alleys once again usable and by extending the “green brand” to very visible aspects of the neighborhood.

**Stormwater Management**

This is a critical component to any urban greening project, and it is intended that any recommended project be sensitive to site design towards maximizing the amount of stormwater retained on site. In addition to relieving pressure on the combined sewer system, retaining water on site will help maintain trees and plantings in greened areas. There are many methods to accomplish this, notably raingardens, retention swales or ponds, the use of rainbarrels or cisterns, and greenroofs when feasible. Note that trees themselves have large surface areas (leaves) with which they are able to uptake large quantities of stormwater as well, thus are an important component in stormwater management in urban areas by themselves. Proper stormwater management is a key factor in repairing ecology in urban areas to a functional level.

**Non-Land Use Green Practices**

Building a sustainable community also involves green infrastructure of another type. In this case, we are not talking about planting vegetation but rather about reformatting current infrastructure to make it more eco-friendly. One of the advantages of pursuing this as a form of community development is that it not only makes the community financially and ecologically sustainable, but also supports a consistent green branding, making the community more marketable to those people who care about these issues and for whom our urban location is already desirable for its sustainability attributes.

**Heating Efficiency**

The compact homes that predominate in our neighborhoods have the potential for a high level of energy efficiency if properly retrofitted. Both lifestyle consistency and economic advantages can become selling points as a result, by means of:

- Conventional weatherization that, in combination with furnace upgrades, can be a part of green branding of our neighborhoods while simultaneously improving neighborhood prosperity. Upgrading rental homes will be a special challenge.
- Geothermal and solar heating systems for individual homes and groups of homes can be a way of retrofitting homes with ancient and inefficient heating systems to further extend the green brand to all aspects of the community. While this level of retrofitting may have a very long payback period, it may attract residents who have a very strong ethical commitment to a sustainable lifestyle.

**Electrical Generation**

Solar generation of electricity paired with new and retrofitted commercial and residential properties can also extend further the ethical and value-added aspects of green community development.
Summary:
This paper presents a vision of Southwest Detroit’s future as an ideal sustainable community that has a strong visual image as a green community consistent with reality at every level, from homes, to green-themed streets and alleys, to parks, greenways and non-motorized pathways, to walk-to-work employment opportunities. This path of investment is consistent with the basic givens of our community geography – a dense community intended by original design as a series of walkable neighborhoods located close to centers of business, logistics and compact scale manufacturing. The recommended paths of development will add value to the community in several steps:

- Homes will be worth more because they will be less costly to operate
- The environment will be more attractive
- Children’s developmental needs will be addressed
- Work will be near at hand
- Neighborhoods can be effectively branded as green communities
- Diverse cultural attributes will be developed
- Attraction of creative young professionals to the area creating additional economic activity making the area more exciting and rewarding for all residents.