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Why the strategic plan for Upper Lawrenceville wins awards and really works

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Community development master plans are sometimes dismissed as dust-collectors, documents that just sit on shelves. But in the first year of its existence Upper Lawrenceville's strategic development plan (<http://www.evolveea.com/work/upper-lawrenceville-community-visioning>) has earned accolades and enabled growth in the neighborhood.

With funding from the Design Center (<http://designcenterpgh.org/>), the Lawrenceville Corporation (<http://lvpg.com/>) and its sister organization, Lawrenceville United (<http://www.lunited.org/>), hired sustainable architecture and design firm evolveEA (<http://www.evolveea.com/>) to facilitate the creation of the neighborhood's Targeted Development Strategy. Last week, the firm's work was recognized with Honors Awards in Regional and Urban Design from the Pennsylvania Chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) as well as AIA Pittsburgh.

The firm helped the community to identify and communicate its major challenges as well as its objectives for the future, says evolveEA's strategic principal Christine Mondor

"Design doesn't have to be reserved for big projects and big places. There's a great design community here and great community, period. Bringing those two together was the satisfaction of this project."

In the year since completing the strategic planning process, the community has maintained its momentum. Working groups for greening, housing and the riverfront have tackled numerous near-term goals, such as fostering a fresh food initiative and rethinking Duncan Park. Mondor attributes the growth to having a clear, shared vision.

"These plans give something to those who have a vision and the passion to make it happen," Mondor says. "They can use it to pull others in."

Matthew Galluzo, executive director of the Lawrenceville Corporation, says the Upper Lawrenceville community is the most civically engaged set of stakeholders he's ever worked with.

"We had [more than] 200 stakeholders coming out in the middle of winter to be a part of this planning process," he says. "It's people pulling major initiatives by the nose to completion."

The plan created a forum for residents to discuss the spirit of their community, one that's reflected in the assertion, "We make things." It's a mindset that will determine how the neighborhood will grow, says Lauren Byrne, Lawrenceville United's executive director.

“Residents can say, ‘we don’t want development at any cost. We want to be selective and make sure development aligns with the [plan] we laid out.’”

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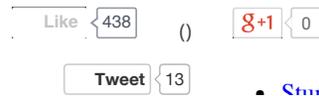
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Margaret J. Krauss is a writer, radio producer, and researcher. If not biking Pittsburgh's streets or swimming its rivers, she is likely geeking out about a really good story.

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Upper Lawrenceville works hard to fashion a new image

'The neighborhood is back to where people feel safe. Now we can concentrate on our vision.'

February 4, 2013 10:38 AM

By Diana Nelson Jones Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

McCandless Avenue is a steep shot down from Stanton Avenue to the Allegheny River, and it lies at the heart of a new neighborhood plan for Upper Lawrenceville.

Where it meets Butler Street, it could be the hub the neighborhood lacks. Where it meets the Allegheny, it could provide river access the neighborhood craves. And with strategically planted trees, curb cuts and landscaping, it could detour much of the stormwater that rushes down it.

The plan designates these roles for McCandless. It had the support of standing-room-only crowds at meetings in October, November and January at the Ancient Order of Hibernians hall on Carnegie Street, where residents poured out ideas to improve housing, greening and retail opportunities.

The western border on Butler intersects with 51st Street/Stanton, where the stone wall of the Allegheny Cemetery reinforces the division between Upper and Central Lawrenceville. Several blocks in, the intersection with McCandless could be activated for a warmer neighborhood welcome. The eastern border taps Morningside at 62nd Street; the southern border with Stanton Heights stutters along a wooded hillside full of dead ends and public steps.

Market forces that have transformed Lower and Central Lawrenceville are already marching in, with new home buyers and storefronts on Butler. The planning process gives Upper Lawrenceville a way to direct the market to respond to its self-image -- distinct from its trendier, less industrial and increasingly expensive sisters.

"We are scared to death of gentrification in the 10th Ward," said Deirdre Kane, a 39-year-old native who, like many old-timers, still refers to the neighborhood that way. "We heard it from people from their 20s to their 70s: 'I don't want to be priced out of my house.' "

Most homes are modest and working class. Many offer sweat-equity opportunities appealing to young people.

"It's the only affordable place to move if you absolutely want to be in Lawrenceville," said Ms. Kane, a steward of community gardens. "And hipsters are not afraid of a little grit or a place that's still a little sketchy."

The neighborhood sees the opportunity for grit, industry and affordability co-existing with more investment, amenities and environmental improvements.

"I feel like it's finally our turn," lifelong resident Nancy Bittner said. "Our problem was we had more public safety issues and a larger senior population. We had our share of landlords who weren't as diligent as they should have been."

A 21-year board member of Lawrenceville United, she said she has seen crime drop dramatically. "We have worked very hard with the Zone Two police" and with landlords to be more compliant with the city code and in tenant control.

"The neighborhood is back to where people feel safe," she said. "Now we can concentrate on our vision."

Except for a barren stretch of riverfront owned by the Urban Redevelopment Authority, the Allegheny is lined with manufacturers that inhibit public access to the water. The plan has adopted a "we make it" slogan to attract small businesses, playing off the industrial identity, but residents also want to use the riverfront.

The plan devises a possibility at the end of McCandless. If it were enacted today, a stormwater retention plaza with a bicycle repair station near a trail would cozy up to the west side of the Barber Spring Co.

The metal guard rail at the street's dead end would be replaced by a landscaped walk to "McCandless Beach," which would include a put-in for kayaks and two stationary barges, one with a swimming pool, the other for movie showings.

Lawrenceville United and the Lawrenceville Corp., two complementary nonprofits, will fit elements of the plan into work they are already doing on greening projects and economic development, said James Eash, a community outreach specialist for the Lawrenceville Corp.

Evolve, an environmental design consulting firm, was hired to lead the planning process. Under the

guidance of Christine Mondor, a principal at evolveEA, the plan calls for McCandless to become a demonstration model of stormwater solutions.

If the plan were enacted today, street trees with elongated and deep root wells would march the length of the corridor, turning it into a green boulevard. Intersections would be bumped out to slow traffic and accommodate tree circles.

"With a chain of continuous tree wells to slow, clean and infiltrate [water]," Ms. Mondor said, "by the time you get to the flat area, you can divert water into McCandless Park, which has a proposed redesign. At the [riverfront] plaza, you'd have significant infiltration."

Mr. Eash said revamping McCandless would address several complaints residents have about the avenue.

"They say, 'People drive too fast.' They say, 'We want more street trees.' And then there was the larger, critical issue of stormwater mitigation."

The Lawrenceville Corp. is writing grant applications seeking funds to begin implementing changes on McCandless, he said.

Reuse of the former McCleary School and a marketing strategy for selling alley houses are other priorities of the plan.

"The alley housing was such a major issue" several years ago, Mr. Eash said. Many were derelict and used for drug dealing. With the worst of them demolished, he said, "now we can see them as assets."

The alleys are too narrow for cars to park and the houses are tiny, but he said several people at the meetings said, " 'Hey, I ride a bike. I'd love to have a place like that.' "

Ms. Kane said the planning process was uplifting "because of the range of people old and young coming together who all want the same things."

"I've lived here all my life, and I couldn't believe how many people I didn't know," Ms. Bittner said. "It seemed like this happened quietly, people coming over time, but with everyone in one room, you feel the impact. And they were concerned about things the older people wanted.

"The older residents deserve this. They stuck it out, came to block watches, picked up trash. They worked and worked. You work and work for change and wonder if you'll see it in your lifetime, then all of a sudden you see that it has already come."

Things Are Looking Up in Upper Lawrenceville

By Lauren Byrne and James Eash

Lawrenceville United and Lawrenceville Corporation

Lawrenceville – More than 60 residents filled the Ancient Order of Hibernian’s Club at 52nd and Carnegie Streets on Oct. 18 to begin planning for their future. At this first of three public community sessions, residents came together to share their vision for Upper Lawrenceville – known locally as the 10th Ward – by kicking off a long-awaited neighborhood planning and visioning process. The diverse group was a broad representation of the neighborhood: elderly residents, 20-somethings, longtime homeowners and recent transplants all coming together to create a shared vision for the 10th Ward.

Over the past two years, Lawrenceville United convened groups of residents, business owners and community stakeholders to begin thinking comprehensively about the future of the 10th Ward. While the neighborhood as a whole has experienced incredible transformation over the last decade, planning efforts have focused primarily on Central and Lower Lawrenceville, with Upper Lawrenceville largely absent from the conversation. This current effort represents the first with a specific focus on the future of the 10th Ward.

For more than a decade, 10th Ward residents and their community organizations have worked hard to confront blight and crime throughout the neighborhood. Early efforts included extensive public safety initiatives, “clean & green” strategies and the demolition of blighted, crumbling properties too far gone to save. Through the initial conversations in 2010 and 2011, residents were able to identify new projects or themes they wanted to explore in the 10th Ward. This included creating and preserving more passive and active green space, creative ideas for the reuse of vacant lots and buildings, a reuse plan for vacant but prominent neighborhood landmarks (McCleary School and St. Kieran’s Church in particular), a focus on neighborhood gateways at Stanton and McCandless Avenues and a re-imagining of the role of McCandless Avenue as a main community corridor.

With this prioritized list of items to explore, the Lawrenceville Corporation secured funding from the Design Fund to support professional planning efforts. An advisory committee representative of the community selected local firm Evolve Environment and Architecture to lead the public engagement and community visioning activities.

As lead consultant, Evolve was tasked with helping create a community-

endorsed neighborhood vision that residents could work to implement. Through innovative and exciting engagement activities, Evolve worked with the energetic group of residents and business owners to help articulate a vision for the community’s future. Discussions revolved around local food economies, increased green space and storm water management, community gathering space, family-friendly amenities and programs, bike lanes, green streets and alleyways and strategies for keeping the neighborhood affordable for long-term residents and families.

Energetic residents, both lifelong and newcomers alike, have driven the process. Dora Walmsley, a new 10th-Ward homeowner renovating a house on McCandless, participated in the first two public meetings. “There are few opportunities where one can actually shape the landscape of their neighborhood,” Walmsley noted, “and I feel really fortunate to be able to participate in the Upper Lawrenceville planning process as a new homeowner.” She continued, “I realize many people have been advocating for this for a long time. I look forward to working with my neighbors to positively contribute to the neighborhood we all call home.”

Nancy Bittner is a lifelong resident of the 10th Ward who has experienced the neighborhood transition firsthand. “I’ve seen so many changes in this community over the years, and thanks to the hard work of so many residents, it’s once again beginning to flourish,” said Bittner. “Through the Upper Lawrenceville planning process, we’ve been given the opportunity to shape our neighborhood in a positive way, keeping a focus on the interests and priorities of all residents – new and old alike. It’s exciting to play a part in the future of my neighborhood.”

The Upper Lawrenceville Plan will ultimately serve as a guide for how community organizations and resident stakeholders can make positive, transformative change in the 10th Ward. The community-driven process will provide a clear vision for future of the 10th Ward, and will help shape the next decade of local community development.

The second community meeting was held November 29, and the final meeting will take place in mid-January. Please contact Lawrenceville United at 412-802-7220 or info@lunited.org for the exact date if you are interested in becoming involved. ♦

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Walkabout: Upper Lawrenceville looks to revitalize without losing grit

January 29, 2013 12:00 AM

By Diana Nelson Jones Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

While so many neighborhoods are casting about to reinvent themselves as vibrant post-industrial places, denizens of Upper Lawrenceville want to tie a vibrant future to the industry that remains.

They began developing a new vision for the neighborhood, referred to by some residents as the 10th Ward, in a series of three meetings that Lawrenceville United and the Lawrenceville Corp. initiated last fall. With \$15,000 from the Design Center, they hired Christine Mondor of evolve EA, a design firm in Friendship, to lead the sessions, with help from Chelsea Burket, a community strategist with Fourth Economy, a consulting firm on the North Shore.

The Ancient Order of Hibernians' hall on Carnegie Street was standing room only for each meeting. The process linked natives of the neighborhood, old and young, to relative newcomers, many of whom have found the last affordable part of Lawrenceville.

After a final meeting last week, they embarked with a new plan and strategies to enliven the neighborhood without sacrificing its authenticity.

"There are different market forces at work here," Ms. Mondor said. "People know they're not going to have a SouthSide Works, but they do want access to the river."

Upper Lawrenceville departs from Central Lawrenceville at 51st Street, where Stanton Avenue begins its steep upward crawl along the unbroken wall of the Allegheny Cemetery. It hands off to Morningside at 62nd Street. The north-to-south borders are from the Allegheny River to a zigzag of street pieces that include Celadine, Wickliff, Christopher and 57th.

Although industries operate in the neighborhood's lower and central parts, those areas have largely lost the gritty images and sensibilities that residents of Upper Lawrenceville like about their section. But those in the 10th Ward have more blight and crime to address and more spaces to plug with

businesses.

New retail and several appealing restaurants have become established there in recent years, but as part of the conversation, old-timers told newer residents about neighborhood gems such as Foster's Meats, a longtime butcher shop, and learned about new places such as Wild Purveyors, a store that sells seasonal, organic and local food directly from farms.

Participants emphasized their desire for more businesses that make things.

One of the largest stakeholders, the Barber Spring Co., has for more than 100 years made steel springs in the neighborhood on 4.25 acres along the Allegheny River.

"They're a good neighbor," Ms. Mondor said. "They're quiet, they're not dirty and they employ people."

Among the ideas that took hold were freeing up some riverfront for a green plaza and kayak put-in at the end of McCandless Street. A renovated McCandless Street would become a boulevard of tree rows and tee clusters for stormwater detention.

The plan also calls for reuse of vacant neighborhood landmarks such as McCleary School and St. Kieran Church.

Several 20-foot-wide alleys are stitched together with little houses, many in rough condition. Parking in these alleys is a problem that the participants aim to solve with a strategy to market the houses as fixer-uppers to people whose means of getting around is a bicycle.

The participants also want more fresh-food options and imagined the use of vacant lots for farmers and flea markets. Now-vacant storefronts could incorporate pop-up enterprises and possible incubator sites to encourage and support their efforts to establish.

Dora Walmsley moved to Lawrenceville six years ago and rented in the lower portion. As property costs increased, she said, she and her boyfriend decided to buy in Upper Lawrenceville.

"Lots of houses were out of our price range if they needed to be gutted," she said, "but we found a really affordable house that had a lot of work done and was within our price range."

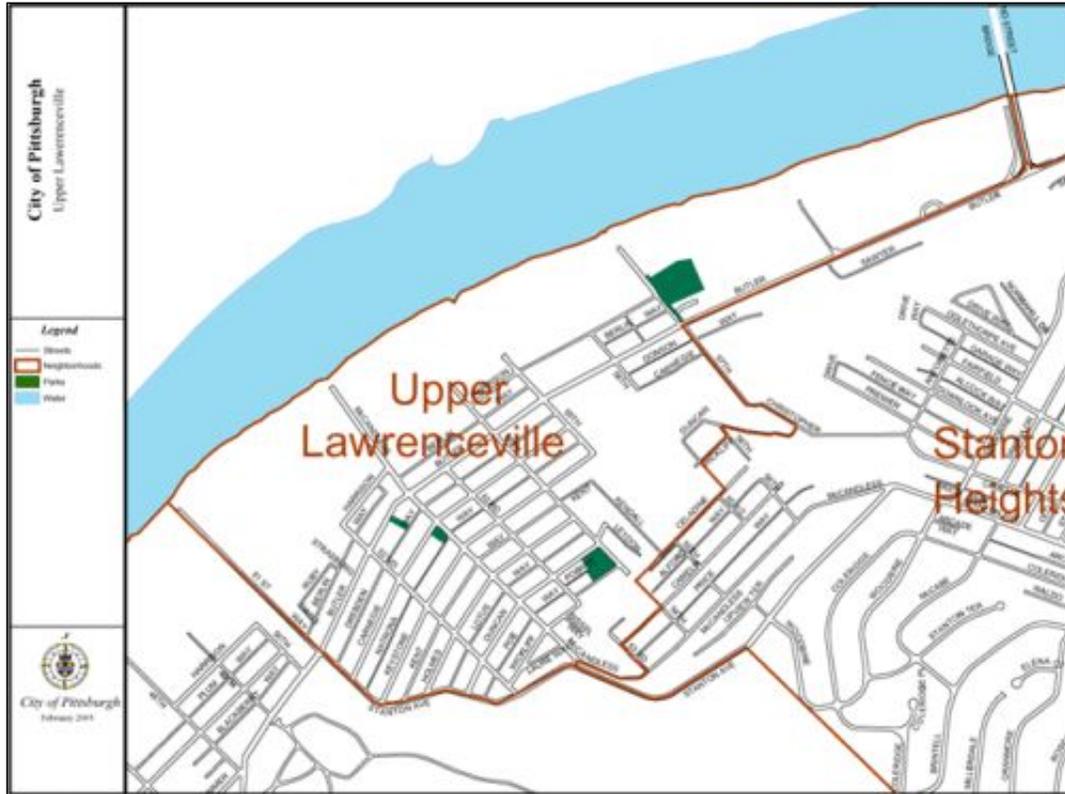
She wants the neighborhood to maintain its relative affordability, Ms. Walmsley said. "That's the benefit of these meetings, for people who feel strongly about things to have a seat at the table.

"We talked about avoiding gentrification and about places like Tex's Auto Sales" at 52nd and Butler streets. To some people, it is not an attractive business, she said, "but everyone understands the importance of having a diverse set of businesses instead of a coffee shop on every corner."



10th ward to be heard from

Written by Diana Nelson Jones on Friday, 25 January 2013 12:58 pm.



The Lawrenceville that's gotten so much attention in recent years isn't all there is to Lawrenceville. There's Lower and Central Lawrenceville and then there's the 10th ward, a.k.a. Upper Lawrenceville.

Upper Lawrenceville's borders are from 51st Street/Stanton Avenue to 62nd Street and from the Allegheny River up to a convoluted zig-zag of streets that include Celadine, Wickliff, Christopher and 57th. Better to consult the map above, which I found on the City of Pittsburgh website.

While retail has nearly saturated the lower portions and rents continue to escalate, Upper Lawrenceville — which old-timers and even some fresher arrivals prefer to call the 10th ward — remains for the most part its old self. It even has existing industrial production, most notably at the **Barber Spring Co.**, which for more than 100 years has manufactured steel springs for railroad companies.

When so many neighborhoods are casting about to create vibrant post-industrial places, a recently completed visioning process among 10th ward stakeholders has concluded that industry is part of the identity they want to celebrate.

They are hatching creative plans to ensure that their piece of Lawrenceville also becomes vibrant and cool, but they're determined to be different, because they are.

Among the ideas for a better 10th ward are a remaking of McCandless Street as a stormwater catchment network, a riverfront kayak put-in, recruitment of compatible businesses, including small production entrepreneurs, and a captivating, 21st century marketing of tiny alley houses on tiny alleys.

Are you from, or do you currently live in the 10th ward? Let Walkabout know what you like and don't like about it, how you would like to see it progress into the future.

Barring the intrusion of unforeseen forces, my page 2 Walkabout column on Tuesday will delve into these ideas in more detail.

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