

The Evolution of the West End Civic Association

Context

The West End Civic Association has been in existence for over 30 years. WECA's early efforts were concentrated on building community spirit, zoning issues, and historic preservation. During the 1990's the West End began to experience many problems that previously had been in other Hartford neighborhoods. There was a rise in crime, particularly drug dealing, vacant storefronts, and a burned out office building on Farmington Avenue, a number of vacant apartment buildings and even several houses. Within several months, the neighborhood was faced with two other major problems: a developer proposed demolishing the Colonial Theatre to construct an auto parts store and Fleet Bank announced the closing of its branch on Farmington Avenue. Open drug dealing on South Whitney Street, which was ongoing and worsening, created fear in many residents.

New leadership in WECA attacked these issues head-on, with great success. After months of negotiation, a group of residents formed the Colonial Theatre Renaissance Corporation and purchased the theatre property and adjacent parcels. Neighbors rallied against the Fleet closing, and got a commitment that the branch would stay open. Residents also realized that there were numerous problems along the entire length of Farmington Avenue, which led to the formation of the Farmington Avenue Joint Committee. Working with landlords and the West End Community Service Officer, Barry Pasquerell, neighbors were able to secure space for a police community service office in an apartment building where drug trafficking took place and as a result the dealers were soon gone. Neighbors fixed up the unit, donated furniture, and the space was used for public safety meetings.

As many Hartford neighborhoods adopted the NRZ process, the West End became more interested in how this could help strengthen our neighborhood. After considerable discussion, WECA voted to become a Neighborhood Revitalization Zone, and amended its by-laws accordingly on February 9, 1999. WECA expanded its Board, which is the NRZ Planning Committee, to be more representative of the neighborhood. The NRZ legislation has made WECA a far more representative organization for the neighborhood. For instance, the Board now includes a landlord, a minister, and seven tenants – constituencies that were not previously represented.

Back in September 1999, WECA's general NRZ planning committee convened an open meeting to discuss the NRZ process and identify initial

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goals through interest-based working groups. WECA, the NRZ umbrella organization, recognized that it had most often reacted to, rather than initiated, issues or actions in the West End. The NRZ planning process was seen as the opportunity for us to proactively deal with issues and ideas that came from *within* our neighborhood. A NRZ strategic plan not only gives us specific authority and powers, it allows us to coalesce all of the efforts that we have been involved with in the past into a blueprint for what we want to accomplish in the future.

Those first few initial goals eventually gave rise to our subcommittee assignments (Appendix E contains the NRZ By-laws and committee membership):

- ♦ Housing and Business Development
- ♦ Education, Recreation and the Arts
- ♦ Public Safety

During the subcommittee work each group identified needs, priorities, and goals/recommendations. The following sections summarize this effort:

Housing and Business Development Committee

Committee Charge

The Housing and Business Development Committee of the West End NRZ met a considerable number of times in 2000 and 2001. The Committee understood its task to be to develop or recommend a strategy for the West End neighborhood of Hartford regarding all of its housing and commercial properties. The end result represents the consensus of the entire committee.

The Committee considered the commercial uses in the neighborhood - primarily along Farmington Avenue - and the housing stock of the entire neighborhood. We examined each sector of the neighborhood's housing stock and the several significant development opportunities that now or soon will exist in the West End.

The Committee did not view its jurisdiction to include the entire "built environment" of the West End; therefore, we excluded all existing "non-profit institutional and governmental uses" - these include at least The Hartford Seminary, The Hartford College for Women, Shepherd Park, The Village for Families and Children, The Connecticut Historical Society, The University of Connecticut Law School, churches, the firehouse, Elizabeth Park and the police community service office. All these existing

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uses are positive and contribute greatly to the quality of life in the West End. The entire community should continue to support these important land uses and their good works. The Committee would view any proposed changes of use as potentially significant and appropriate for consideration by the NRZ.

Primary Goals

Commercial Goals

Improvement of the Farmington Avenue commercial strip between Woodland Street and Prospect Avenue, with particular emphasis between Sisson Avenue and Prospect Avenue, is crucial. The Committee's primary concerns in the Commercial area are traffic, parking, improved public spaces and adoption of aesthetic design standards for individually owned properties. Simply stated, the NRZ seeks to discourage unattractive buildings and uses and encourage more attractive buildings and uses.

However, the Committee also recognizes that other groups – primarily, the Farmington Avenue Joint Committee, the Farmington Avenue Business District and the Colonial Theatre Renaissance Corporation – have assumed a leading role for this area. The NRZ should encourage the active role played by these groups, participate in their processes to the extent feasible for the NRZ, advocate to those groups for the inclusion of measures important to the NRZ, comment upon and critique their proposals, and actively support the recommendations of those groups if they are consistent with and promote the strategic plan. The NRZ recognizes the importance of the work of those groups and strongly encourages their efforts.

Housing Goals

General. The West End contains a considerable stock of both rental housing and owner-occupied housing. For simple analytical purposes, that housing is located in four (4) different sectors in the West End: (a) "Southeast", that is, south of Farmington Avenue from Sisson Avenue to South Whitney Street; (b) "Southwest", that is, from Tremont Street to Prospect Avenue; (c) "Central", that is, between Farmington Avenue and Elizabeth Street; and (d) "North", that is, North of Elizabeth Street. Very generally, the city's existing zoning patterns for permitted housing uses conform to these sectors.

The Committee Report proposed separate strategies for all four sectors. We also emphasize the need to distinguish between "rental" and

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“ownership” areas in all four sectors and have proposed different strategies for dealing with the special problems arising from absentee ownership.

Generally, however, the Committee’s goal was to identify strategies that would comprehensively address all housing sectors of the West End and result in an improved housing stock. We would measure “improvement” by applying these objective criteria:

- ♦ Better “curb appeal” in terms of: (a) clean streets; (b) neat yards; and (c) well painted and maintained houses.
- ♦ Increasing property values; and
- ♦ In the case of rental properties, involvement of absentee landlords, better maintenance and management.

Southeast Sector. The Committee has identified the area lying south of Farmington Avenue between Sisson Avenue and South Whitney Street to be the primary area of concern in the housing field. This is the portion of the South sector where absentee ownership is clustered, although there are also some attractive single family homes in this area.

Southwest Sector. The Southwest Sector – that is, the area lying south of Farmington Avenue from Tremont Street to Prospect Avenue – is generally and increasingly characterized by single family housing and by owner-occupancy of 1-4-unit buildings in the case of multi-unit buildings. Warrenton Avenue (west from Sisson) and Oxford, Beacon, Prospect and Regent Streets are all comprised mainly of single homes. The Committee believes it makes sense to encourage continued homeownership and owner-occupancy on all of these streets in order to increase stability and upkeep of property.

Central Sector. North of Farmington Avenue, in the Central Sector, the Committee has identified in, addition to several individual properties, Sherman Street and Whitney Street, particularly between Fern and Elizabeth Streets as blocks needing special attention.

North Sector. This sector is the only area of the City which is zoned entirely R-8. However, certain institutions located in and near the sector pre-date zoning. The principal concerns affecting the North sector are to (a) maintain architectural and historic characteristics of homes in the neighborhood; and (b) address the several development opportunities that

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exist in this sector in a way which complements the predominant uses in this sector while yielding solid tax revenues to the City.

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Education, Recreation and The Arts Committee

Introduction

The Arts, Education and Recreation Committee is a collective of residents looking to address the obvious topic as well as the needs associated with our diverse population. Thus, we set out to focus on programmatic needs as well as physical improvements that the neighborhood would benefit from.

Historically, there was a substantial base within the Youth Athletic Program Initiative of the WECA Youth and Recreation Committee with volunteers organizing and supervising activities in a variety of sports for children ages 5 to 15. Our committee has tapped the combined knowledge of many people throughout the community, each bringing to the table specific ideas and overall commitment to improving the quality of life in the West End. This collective effort led to identification of the following goals:

- ◆ Enhance/Identify Existing Public/Private Space
- ◆ Build on the neighborhood's existing assets
- ◆ Get the community more involved in Noah Webster School and the school more open to the community
- ◆ Focus on the arts in the community
- ◆ Create an environment fostering the arts
- ◆ Improve sense of community
- ◆ Increase recreational opportunities south of Farmington Avenue
- ◆ Create outdoor/indoor "kids space"
- ◆ Develop art education for adults and children
- ◆ Publicize West End accomplishments

Community Center

Our community has a long history of organizing and coordinating neighborhood events. These efforts have grown tremendously over the years, despite the fact that the neighborhood does not have a designated gathering place.

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The idea that the West End needs a community center evolved from several directions simultaneously. The Arts, Education and Recreation Committee of the NRZ Working Group had identified a critical need for more recreational opportunities for neighborhood youth. Researching the options for providing recreational opportunities led to the idea of a youth center; a safe place for young people to gather informally, get help with their homework and perhaps even have a chance to increase their computing skills.

At the same time, another group of residents started to work on the lack of recreational opportunities in the southeast sector. With the help of the Community Block Organizer, the two groups were brought together. They were soon joined in their efforts by the WECA Recreation Committee. The combined group started meeting and putting ideas together.

As the idea of a youth center was explored, it became apparent that there were other groups in the neighborhood who could benefit from a community-gathering place. There are many senior citizens in the West End, but there is not a center that can be used for recreation and hosting community activities such as health fairs and flu shot clinics. A community center could also serve as an accessible, non-intimidating spot for the Community Block Organizer office. It could also be used as a site for many of the meetings that take place in the neighborhood. Finally a community center could be a place where people from all parts of the neighborhood could share interests and activities.

Play Spaces

The idea of community space responds to desires for a more integrated neighborhood identity as well as the growing numbers of young adults in the West End. A group consisting primarily of mothers of children in the neighborhood school system has been looking at neighborhood demographics based on voter registration data. The group has projected that in the next 5 to 10 years the community will see a rise in the number of teenagers in the neighborhood. They anticipate a concentration of children in the neighborhoods south of Farmington Avenue where there are many multi-family dwellings. The community is aware that there will be a growing need for play spaces and there are various ways to approach this issue.

Looking at a layout of the local school and vacant city-owned lots reveals there is the potential for development of such areas within the neighborhood. It has been suggested that separate spaces be provided for elementary aged kids and high school aged kids. The group has proposed

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to use community schools as the central focus and to build on age appropriate activities already planned by the school.

Cooperation is vital to realizing the group's goal to establish safe zones and strong youth programming. The responsibility for these zones or spaces should be shared between the community, the School and the City. Potential institutions to become involved are the Fire Department, Scouts, Boys and Girls Clubs, Noah Webster (reading program), and the Shepherd Park community. Understanding how the City and the Schools define "Community Schools" is essential to this cooperative effort. In addition, partnering with the neighboring Asylum Hill community could allow for land on each of our boundaries to be converted to play spaces.

The following short-term goals have been identified and progress is being made to realize these goals by the end of 2001.

- ♦ More widely publicize existing recreation programs
- ♦ Work with the Parks and Recreation Department to staff Elizabeth Park this summer
- ♦ Work with the administration at Noah Webster to open the school gym for after school recreation
- ♦ Put up a basketball court behind the Firehouse on Sisson Avenue

Public Health and Safety Committee

Introduction

The Public Health and Safety Committee of WECA has a core group of 12 to 15 members and active participation of more than 45 residents. Much of the Committee's activity is issue-driven and deals with concerns that are high visibility and that transcend everything in the neighborhood:

- ♦ rodent control,
- ♦ city clean-ups,
- ♦ traffic control,
- ♦ play spaces,
- ♦ crossing guards,
- ♦ crime.

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Because these things are so central to quality of life in the neighborhood, Committee meetings can draw as many as 80 participants, depending on the issue. These issues require vigilance and monitoring to maintain forward motion in improving conditions. The Committee as the neighborhood's voice on these core issues makes its activities a prime vehicle for improving communication and building a sense of community within the neighborhood.

- ◆ The Committee's overall mission is to maintain and support activities and programs that insure the health, safety and welfare of all residents. Its activities are focused on achieving the following :
- ◆ Ensure that residents are gaining the maximum benefit of public services.
- ◆ Ensure that conditions effecting the health, safety and well-being of residents are dealt with effectively and efficiently by the responsible party.
- ◆ Ensure that appropriate mechanisms are in place to identify issues and problems, and monitor response.
- ◆ Maintain open lines of communication with other NRZ and Working Group Committees to reflect the complexity and breadth of certain issues facing the neighborhood.

Rodent Control

The Committee has been instrumental in focusing attention on the City's rodent problem; through a commitment of \$2.2 to \$3 million the neighborhoods have been supplied with new equipment and services, including new trash cans, retrofitted trash trucks and inspection teams. As the direct result of the increased pressure the Committee created around this issue, the West End is the only community to be added to the City's original 179 targeted blocks. Additional progress in responding to the problem occurred when the City created a specific Rodent Control Task Force (RCTF) and established a monitoring mechanism. The neighborhood has been acting as a watchdog for RCTF response, reporting through documentation and photographs any instance where the City violates its contract for rat abatement. Due to the West End's persistence, the City designated Arthur Miller, Director of the Department of Public Works, as its representative at our committee meetings. Mr. Miller has participated in several of our meetings and discussed roles and

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responsibilities of the City and residents in controlling the problem at a general membership meeting.

The Public Health and Safety Committee urges the neighborhood to use the 5-A-C-T-I-O-N hotline, set up by the City, to report violations in general and particularly in regards to the rat abatement program. The City has declared it will respond to these complaints within 7-10 days. In actuality response time has been much longer and inspection teams have been very slow to respond. The Committee and the neighborhood will continue to monitor City performance and work with the City's representatives so that the significant progress made to date will be sustained and improved. The Committee will also monitor funding of the program.

Hartford Cleans Up

The West End is a leader in the number of people participating in Hartford Cleans Up. Enthusiasm for the spring event has continued and been bolstered by holding a block party in conjunction with the clean-up. Block parties have been very effective at getting the neighborhood involved, with the coordination being handled by the blocks themselves. Most often block groups solicit support from residents within the neighborhood and local businesses. WECA has suggested that there be two such events scheduled annually for the community.

Transportation and Traffic Issues

Like many other Hartford neighborhoods, traffic is becoming a major issue. Speeding and ignoring of traffic lights and STOP signs are becoming problems of epidemic proportions. Over the past 20 years, the City has installed STOP signs at nearly every single intersection as a response to residents' complaints. Noah Webster School even changed its entrance to a side street to avoid the danger of students being left off and picked up on the far busier Whitney Street. Whitney Street residents have posted signs on their front lawns asking drivers to slow down. Residents in the southeast sector have successfully petitioned the City to install a flashing red light at the corner of South Whitney and Warrenton to complement the four-way STOP signs. Recently, residents have circulated petitions demanding speed bumps on residential streets.

WECA has taken the position that speed bumps on one street will only divert the traffic to the next street over, spurring additional demands for more speed bumps on more streets. WECA has asked that the City not

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install speed bumps until a traffic-calming plan could be developed for the entire neighborhood.

At a meeting in the fall of 2000 of approximately 30 Block Captains and neighborhood activists, traffic problems were cited by two-thirds of those present as the most important issue on the street. Considering there had been a rash of thefts and garage break-ins throughout the warm months, this demonstrates what a consistent problem this has become neighborhood-wide.

In response to these growing concerns, several residents formed an ad hoc committee, did their own research, and developed their own power point presentation, and have presented their traffic calming ideas to numerous block clubs throughout the neighborhood. Additionally, last year the effectiveness of the community police officer (CSO) on traffic calming was proven in a problem of running red lights at Shepherd Park. Upon notifying the City Traffic Engineer, Bhupen Patel, he suggested referring the issue to CSO John Bremser. Subsequently, Officer Bremser patrolled the intersection of Farmington and Sisson Avenue for one hour and wrote approximately a dozen traffic violations. There is a consensus developing that there is a great need for traffic calming devices on the residential streets, better traffic circulation on the minor and major arteries, and more pedestrian amenities and safer crosswalks.

The major focus of our efforts should be:

- ◆ Utilize traffic calming measures to reduce traffic speed and increase pedestrian safety.
- ◆ Work with and support the efforts of the Farmington Avenue Joint Committee to improve traffic, parking and pedestrian access on Farmington Avenue.
- ◆ Develop a Parking Plan for the residential streets.

We recognize that we must deal with traffic congestion and as a goal try to attain a reasonable balance between the need to use, move and park cars, and the desire to maintain a quality of life. We also recognize that there will be many elements to achieving this balance, such as: technical evaluations of the problem and potential solutions, community education and involvement, beautification initiatives and regulatory issues (e.g. parking ratios, design and enforcement). Other steps can include managing traffic and parking without adversely impacting commercial

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areas and opportunities to facilitate mass transit use, pedestrian activity, bicycle usage, etc.

By taking advantage of our walkable scale, providing a range of transportation choices and linkages beyond our neighborhood, we will be making positive contributions to issues and goals that go beyond our neighborhood boundaries.

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Reallocation of Police Officers

The neighborhood has an ongoing concern over West End police officers routinely being pulled off their patrol to substitute as crossing guards. Currently there are only enough guards to cover the city's daily needs. The lack of a crossing guard at a designated location is treated as an emergency call by the Police Department, which manages the Crossing Guard Program. When a guard is out, a police officer is taken from patrol duty to cover the corner. The neighborhood feels that this is not an appropriate action and in fact, not a wise use of police time. A possible solution is to urge the City to create a pool of crossing guards so that a backup is available when a guard is out.

The neighborhood would like to better understand how the existing program works and to cooperate with the Hartford Police Department to rework and improve this vital program. It is unclear at this time what the Department's next steps will be. The position of crossing guard is not attractive to younger people looking for work, making recruitment difficult. The neighborhood hopes that a solution will be actively sought since the police are losing many patrol duty hours to solving the crossing guard issue.

Crime

The Community Policing/CSO program was a major tool in response to neighborhood crime. In the spring of 2000 the City gutted the pro-active policing mechanism. Before these changes, the CSO attended many of the neighborhood meetings and took the information reported back to his supervisor. Then with the help of other Community Response Division (CRD) units a plan could be formed to solve the issues presented. Today the program is in question and the neighborhood's efforts seem to be lost.

Many residents of the West End believe that crime is being forced from other neighborhoods into ours. Although some statistics suggest this we have not yet established a definitive trend.

Criminal activity is reported through word-of-mouth or at neighborhood meetings. Over the last three years the Safety Committee has seen how important current information is in fighting crime. In the past we had access to a broad range of current crime information through the community computer and CCP meetings. As the community computer NPS system is no longer updated, the only information the Safety Committee gets in hard copy is that from CCP, which involves "hot spots" and CRD's response. The Hartford Police Department is not equipped to

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provide pin maps, graphs and the types of crime lists that the neighborhood once received. The Department, through the CSO, does try to provide information at the monthly safety meetings. Under this arrangement, however, time lags occur while the questions and issues raised at the meeting are researched.

Block Groups

There are 14 to 25 block clubs active in the neighborhood. This strong presence is the result of the efforts of a Community Block Organizer, active in the neighborhood under a Justice Department grant since January 1999. Our Community Block Organizer has built on the WECA block captain system to create resident involvement in areas not previously served. The method of approaching crime control is that the block group organizes around solving a problem. If they can not resolve the issue, it moves to the Safety Committee, who attempts to solve the problem. At that time it is reported to WECA and the neighborhood gets behind the problem as well.

Block groups exist on most streets in the West End. Each street in the Southeast Sector is thoroughly organized with a group that meets each month. About six other streets in the neighborhood have monthly meetings and some streets meet more on an as needed basis. The groups are headed by a "Captain" and operated by collective leadership; group decisions are made by consensus. Each block group sends someone to the Public Safety Committee meeting. The neighborhood has been divided into five sectors, each headed by a Sector Representative who reports to the WECA Executive Board. Their role is to maintain contact with the block groups, coordinate distribution of the West End newsletter and flyers, to report to the Board, and to be the Board's link to the block clubs.

The block club network is a very effective communication tool for the neighborhood. Distribution of paper fliers throughout the neighborhood can be done overnight if needed to inform people of something. The block club organizer keeps the coordination and sharing of information smooth. Everyone who lives on a particular street is invited to attend the block club meeting. The locations and days of meetings are posted on fliers on the relevant groups' street, on the calendar at the Police Community Service Office, and on neighborhood-wide fliers with contact information for each group. The organizer trains people who volunteer and show leadership potential.