

# **Bloomfield-Garfield Corporation**

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## **Report to the Members Annual Membership Meeting October 26, 2015**

The Bloomfield-Garfield Corporation will celebrate 40 years in existence next month, and to say it has been a long journey would probably be an understatement. By the same token, we don't want to make it sound like it's been some kind of forced march across the proverbial desert.

In 1975, much of the Garfield neighborhood, and the adjoining Penn Avenue corridor, were coasting to a dead stop. The area had come to be defined more by what was no longer here than what was. Empty storefronts abounded, and would be added to greatly over the next 20 years. Hundreds of houses in Garfield had been razed, and hundreds more would follow. Over a dozen bars and clubs on Penn Avenue gave the area the feel of "Potterville" at night ("It's A Wonderful Life"). The Friendship neighborhood had been carved up by absent-site landlords, and across the board, homeownership as percentage of all housing units had fallen to all-time lows. Few, if any, programs existed in the community to spur kids on in their education, or help adults find work. The only indicator that was moving decidedly upward was the crime rate.

Tonight, we look back on the successes and the shortcomings of the past year's efforts. It's also the time when the Board of Directors takes a well-deserved bow for all of the hours it spends overseeing the work of staff, and for representing the interests of our members and neighbors in responding to the problems that seem to arise week to week in the Garfield, Bloomfield, and Friendship neighborhoods.

Herewith is that summary.

### ***Youth Development***

The BGC remains one of the city's most active community groups in focusing on the education, employment, health care, and social development of children and teenagers in the community. With over 2,000 kids living in Garfield, Friendship and Bloomfield, there is a lot of ground to cover, obviously.

Under contracts with Neighborhood Learning Alliance (NLA) and the City of Pittsburgh, we were able to afford 70 students at several city high schools the chance to work part-time, while participating in after-school programs at several sites (University Prep High, Obama Academy, Sci-Tech Academy) to keep them on track to graduate and provide them training in various workplace credentials. Over 100 students from these high schools and Alderdice were able to recover lost classroom credits this summer, with help from tutors and volunteers recruited by the BGC and NLA. Two classes of 50 students each at University Prep received in-school training last fall and this spring to ready themselves for the SAT exam as a first step in their pursuit of a college education.

West Penn Hospital and other employers in the area continued to accept many of the students from our after-school program into jobs funded by the Three Rivers Workforce Investment Board. An additional 13 young people, already finished with high school, received workplace training and part-time jobs, with the opportunity to become permanent employees if they successfully complete the program. We've developed a partnership with Tech Shop in East Liberty that allowed 15 high school students to become members and use 3-D printing and other technologies to create their own inventions. A new wave of 20 students is coming to Tech Shop this year.

Under a second contract with NLA, we enrolled 65 children in after-school programs Monday through Thursday at Arsenal K-5 Elementary in Lawrenceville and Woolslair Elementary in Bloomfield. Many of these same youngsters also benefited from a 6-week summer day camp the BGC ran at our own Community Activity Center.

The summer was also an equally busy time in linking 150 high schoolers to 6-week jobs, thanks to funding from the City of Pittsburgh and area foundations. And the BGC contracted again with the city school district to run a swim and water polo camp for 130 elementary and middle-schoolers citywide, as part of their "Summer Dreamers" Program.

A long-running partnership with UPMC's St Margaret Family Health Center on Penn Avenue continues to pay dividends for city schoolchildren. Over 125 students at five different schools in the East End received free screenings and diagnostic services, together with wellness education and sexual awareness training. We also lent staff support to the Eastside Neighborhood Employment Center's initiative to enroll 60 individuals and families in health care plans offered through the Affordable Care Act.

Our Activity Center on N. Pacific Avenue was the scene again in December for a holiday visit from Santa with several hundred children from the community, and remained a frequent venue for baby showers and other family-related events.

### ***Housing Development***

The past year saw the BGC struggle to bring new affordable housing to the

community. A second phase of the Garfield Glen rental development received an allocation of federal tax credits in 2014 from the PA Housing Finance Agency. Those tax credits, to be used by S & A Homes and the BGC, will help with building 19 houses on Kincaid, Broad and Dearborn Streets in Garfield. But they are still sitting in Harrisburg with PHFA, while the partners attempt to round together the funds to fill an \$800,000 gap in a \$4.3 million development budget. If construction of the houses can begin this fall, families earning up to \$35,500 annually will be able to rent them by next fall.

A ground-breaking occurred in December on a 39-unit apartment building at the corner of Penn Avenue and S. Mathilda Street. This development, a partnership between another nonprofit, ACTION Housing, and the BGC, also received an allocation of federal tax credits from the PA Housing Finance Agency that will allow the rents for 1 and 2-bedroom apartments to be leased at below-market rates. The BGC is responsible for finding tenants to fill three new commercial storefronts on the ground floor of the building. A fourth storefront will be held back for use by the BGC and others in sponsoring education programs, employment training, and cultural and literary “pop-up” events for the benefit of community residents.

The first “tiny” house is under construction in Garfield. A non-profit developer, cityLab of Pittsburgh, is erecting a 330-square foot house on a thin tract of land in the 200 block of N. Atlantic Avenue. If well-received by the market, it’s possible another 6 to 8 homes could be built elsewhere in Garfield over the next 18 months. Eve Picker, the founder of cityLab, is using a real estate crowdfunding platform, known as “smallchange.com”, to raise upwards of \$100,000 from investors for the project. The BGC assisted cityLab in securing \$27,500 in foundation funds to pay for site improvements for this first house, and is helping to identify a number of tax-delinquent or city-owned lots for future houses, should the project continue.

The BGC continues to find ways to recycle vacant houses into new ownership. It purchased vacant houses this past year at 4924 and 5147 Dearborn Street from the city, and has found first-time homebuyers for both. Another non-profit agency, the Pittsburgh Housing Development Corp., finally started renovations to a vacant house at 5486 Broad Street that it acquired from the BGC almost two years ago. A second house at 227 N. Fairmount St. should be under rehab this winter.

Efforts to acquire the former Rogers Middle School on Black St. in Garfield and convert it into apartments fell through earlier this year, when the city school district opted to go with a private developer’s bid for the property instead of the BGC’s.

### ***Penn Avenue Revitalization***

The greatest disappointment of the past year has been the problems that have plagued the drawn-out reconstruction of the Penn Avenue right-of-way between Mathilda and Evaline Streets. What was originally intended to be a 16-month project has now entered its third year. The BGC has worked to overcome many of the tensions that have developed between the city and its contractor on the project, and a new December deadline looms in sight.

Planning for a second phase of the avenue's reconstruction, this time from Evaline Street to Graham Street, has commenced in earnest, but the public is approaching the announced project with more wariness, due to the issues with phase one. The community will await the decision of Mayor Bill Peduto next year on its proposed scope, and a likely start date has now been pushed back beyond 2017.

The pending arrival of a new Aldi grocery market in November at 5200 Penn will take the place of a shuttered Bottom Dollar store, reversing a major setback from the 2014 year. Aldi is working diligently with a residents' committee to smooth over any problems associated with the re-opening, and to employ as many neighborhood residents in the new store as it possibly can.

A setback of sorts occurred this month when a Common Pleas Court judge overturned the decision of the city's zoning board to reject plans for an AutoZone retail store at the intersection of Penn and S. Negley Aves. Once home to the "Babyland" business, the developer sought a number of variances from the city in order to build the store that AutoZone reportedly wanted. The judge, in his written opinion, addressed none of the legal reasoning used by the board to deny those variances. If the community decides to appeal the court's decision, it will set the stage for another showdown on the proposed development in front of the state's Commonwealth Court next year.

Our staff still works with business owners, both existing and prospective, to find ways to re-invest in the Penn Avenue corridor. Help is available in locating suitable space, financing, marketing ideas, and solutions to other issues that could be hampering their operations. One example of this was the crafting of a memorandum this past year with the owners of a new event space, known as "Mixtape", at 4907 Penn that will ensure it is a good neighbor. The BGC has also been supporting Café Con Leche, a food and cultural project of Tara Sherry-Torres, that "popped up" at several storefront sites along the avenue in recent months; BOOM Concepts, a shared workspace for minority artists and entrepreneurs at 5139 Penn; and BUNKER Projects, an artist-in-residency program for women at 5106 Penn.

The BGC is also helping several building owners with façade facelifts. Small, matching grants have been committed for projects at 4923, 5120, and 5152 Penn. The BGC is also providing technical assistance to the owner of the former Horoscope Lounge at 5433 Penn as he attempts to re-purpose the building.

And, finally, the Penn Avenue Arts Initiative continues to sponsor a year-round gallery crawl, *Unblurred*, on the first Friday of each month, together with the Garfield Night Market from May through October, as a way to showcase the talents and wares of aspiring artists and entrepreneurs. A Website, *pennavenue.org*, exists to promote these and many other events, including September's "Arts in Motion" festival on Penn.

### ***Public Safety & The Environment***

The BGC convened 11 monthly meetings of its task force committed to improving public safety in the Garfield-Friendship-Penn Avenue area. Its members include representatives from the city police, city building inspection, the county health department, juvenile and adult probation agencies, the courts, and the district attorney's office. One of its principal accomplishments will be the introduction of a bill at city Council in the coming months to de-criminalize the possession of small amounts of marijuana.

The BGC also reviews a list of vacant, deteriorated houses each year with the city's Department of Permits, Inspections, and Licenses to determine which should be condemned and eventually demolished. It is also cooperating with the Urban Redevelopment Authority in taking tax-delinquent, vacant lots into the city's name and holding them for possible future development.

The Western PA Conservancy is starting a second year of work this fall with the Garfield community to produce a plan for a dedicated green zone in the upper part of Garfield. A number of ideas were generated out of a public planning process that took place over the past year.

The BGC is also helping Garfield Community Farm with its acquisition of 18 parcels coming through the city's Vacant Property Reserve.

### ***The Bulletin & Other Communications***

One of the longest-running traditions at the BGC is the publication and distribution of a community newspaper that keeps residents and others informed on what is happening in this part of the city. Feature articles in *The Bulletin* give readers an inside look at both the positive and negative aspects of life in Garfield, Friendship, Lawrenceville, East Liberty and Bloomfield, and the people shaping events in each of these neighborhoods. The paper has developed a loyal base of advertisers in the larger community who contribute over \$40,000 in revenue each year to its publication. This year, we welcomed a new Communications and Marketing Manager, Andrew McKeon, who took over the paper's editorial duties.

In addition to the newspaper, the BGC maintains its Website, *bloomfield-garfield.org*, together with a blog, Facebook page and Twitter account, that help the public understand and engage in what it is the BGC is trying to do in the community and the role they can play in those efforts.

### ***Support for Work of Other Organizations***

The BGC lends its staff time and facilities to, and sometimes shares financial resources with, other non-profit groups whose missions clearly dovetail with our

own. Among these are the Eastside Neighborhood Employment Center (ENEC), NeighborWorks of Western PA, the Pittsburgh Community Reinvestment Group, the Lawrenceville Corporation, and Lawrenceville United. As an example of the fruits of such collaborations, the ENEC helped over 300 city residents find full- or part-time jobs between July of 2014 and this past June. The BGC also hosts the operations of “Neighbors in Need”, a fund dedicated to helping individuals and families in crisis.

***Acknowledgement of Those Who Make Our Work Possible***

Almost 70% of our core operating budget is derived from private grants and donations, without which none of the above would be possible. Many of the programs require corporate and/or philanthropic support for their very survival. This is the time of year we like to thank all of our supporters for their contributions, or for providing the funding critical to our various programs and projects.

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