

Bloomfield-Garfield Corporation

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Report to the Members Annual Membership Meeting October 24, 2016

The Bloomfield-Garfield Corporation will celebrate 41 years in existence next month, and it seems the work to keep our community vibrant and safe never slows for a moment. Change for the better can be quickly overshadowed by setbacks that no one anticipated. Often, the challenge is not to let the accomplishment of one person come at the expense of another. But the economic and social forces that drive the changes we see in people's lives don't always respond to the good intentions of the rest of us. Those can be the occasions for regret and even sorrow.

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 still standing. The empty storefronts on Penn numbered over 60, and finding viable re-uses for many seemed like a hopeless task. At the same time, hundreds of houses in Garfield were falling vacant and eventually met a wrecking ball as their owners decided it wasn't worth the trouble to find buyers. Over a dozen nuisance bars and clubs were systematically ravaging the character of Penn Avenue, giving it the feel of a modern-day Pottsville at night. The Friendship neighborhood, too, was reeling by the mid-1980's, hurt by absent-site landlords who had spent the previous two decades squeezing as many rental units into older Victorian homes as they possibly could.

The social environment wasn't much better as Pittsburgh shifted away from a manufacturing economy. Few, if any, programs existed in the community to spur kids on to a college education, or even help them finish high school. Adults searching for decent-paying jobs found the times equally trying as the employment rate soared as high as 13% in 1982. Few people seemed to have much of a sense of hope for the future. The only indicator that was moving decidedly upward was the crime rate.

Tonight, we like to take one last look back on the successes and the shortcomings of the past year. 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 perspective.

Youth Development

The BGC remains one of the city's premier 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 a contract with another nonprofit in Garfield, the Neighborhood Learning Alliance (NLA), the BGC was able to afford close to 100 children at two city elementary schools (Woolslair and Arsenal K-5) the chance to be part of after-school programs. Two hours of help with schoolwork and recreation time, four days per week, were followed by rides back home for many in the BGC's passenger van. In the summer, upwards of 35 children attended an 8-week camp at the BGC's Community Activity Center. The organization also took part in the United Way's "Summer Dreamers" program that offered 45 youngsters lessons in swimming, water polo, and mindfulness training.

For those in high school, the BGC's College and Career Readiness Program (CCRP) brought in 103 juniors and seniors from city high schools like University Prep and Obama International Academy to assist them with on-time graduation, career and college applications, and training in various workplace credentials. Forty-four seniors either moved on to college or a post-secondary career by the end of this past summer. The BGC is seeking to attract another 120 seniors from the public high schools for the 2016-17 program. Another 35 underclassmen were able to recover lost classroom credits this summer at a storefront on Penn with help from tutors recruited by the BGC and NLA from local colleges. Another 10 of our CCRP students were able to enroll at Carlow College this summer for a course for which they received actual credit. And over 40 students from University Prep high received in-school training for the SAT exam last fall and sat for the test in November.

West Penn Hospital and other employers in the area continued to accept most of the students from our College and Career Readiness Program into paid internships funded by the Three Rivers Workforce Investment Board (TRWIB), a private, nonprofit agency in downtown Pittsburgh. We also placed 20 students at Tech Shop in East Liberty during the school year, through a TRWIB-funded program that allowed them to gain experience with 3-D printing and other technologies as a way to explore career possibilities.

The summer was also an equally busy time again as the BGC placed 160 high school students in 6-week jobs with area employers, thanks to a contract from the TRWIB, using funds provided by the City of Pittsburgh.

A long-running partnership with UPMC's St Margaret Family Health Center on Penn Avenue continues to pay dividends for city schoolchildren. Close to 200 students at five different elementary schools in the East End receive free screenings, diagnostic services, wellness education, and sexual awareness training. We also lent staff support to the Eastside Neighborhood Employment Center's initiative to enroll several dozen individuals and families into health care plans offered through the

federal Affordable Care Act.

Our Community Activity Center on N. Pacific Avenue remained a busy place for community meetings of one sort or another along with a variety of cultural and educational events. It also served as a venue once again for a BGC-run summer camp for 35 children, and for a volunteer-run program that aided 240 taxpayers with the filing of their federal, state and local returns free of charge.

Housing Development

This past year saw construction finally begin, after almost two years of delay, on nineteen new, affordable homes as the second phase of the “Garfield Glen” rental development. Families earning up to \$42,000 annually will be eligible to rent them when work is finished on them at the end of this year. The organization has begun scouting potential sites for a third phase of new homes that would take in vacant lots or abandoned structures between N. Atlantic Avenue and N. Graham Street.

A ribbon-cutting occurred in July 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 created four new commercial storefronts for lease on the ground floor of the building (see page 4).

The first “tiny” house to be built from ground up in the city was completed and sold in Garfield this past March. The BGC has an opportunity to continue the trend towards smaller houses with the planning for three more units on parcels of land in the 5300 block of Hillcrest Street. There is a possibility of incorporating a tiny apartment (e.g., 350 square feet) into a larger house (e.g., 650-750 square feet) as a way to keep homeownership affordable.

The BGC continues to find ways to recycle vacant houses to new owners. Working with another non-profit agency, the Pittsburgh Housing Development Corp., the group saw renovations completed to a vacant house at 5486 Broad Street that is now under sales agreement to a first-time homebuyer. A second house at 227 N. Fairmount St. is now under renovation and should be finished by winter’s end. The BGC has also been notified that vacant houses at 5213 Gem Way and at 5414-18 Kincaid Street are ready to come out of the city’s vacant property reserve to it.

Efforts to acquire the former Rogers Middle School on Black St. in Garfield and convert it into apartments fell through last year when a private developer outbid the BGC for the building. The firm recently secured a building permit to move forward with its renovation of the school as market-rate apartments.

Penn Avenue Revitalization

The first phase of the reconstruction of the Penn Avenue right-of-way between Mathilda and Evaline Streets is done, and a ribbon-cutting last month made it official.

Planning for a second phase of the avenue's reconstruction, to run from Evaline Street to Graham Street, is now underway, with the hope that the engineering contract to prepare the specifications and drawings will be ready for bid by year's end. The BGC is pressing to see that lessons learned from the mistakes that occurred under Phase I are built into the contract specs, and the timeline for its execution, for Phase II. Mayor Bill Peduto will decide by early 2018 on the final work scope for the project, and a likely construction start appears destined for the spring of 2019.

A new Aldi grocery market arrived almost a year ago at 5200 Penn, replacing a shuttered Bottom Dollar store, ranked as one of the major setbacks of 2014. Aldi has been diligent in sitting down with neighbors to smooth over any problems related to the store's operations, given that it sits next to a residential district, and in employing as many neighborhood people as possible at the store.

The BGC continues to await the outcome of an appeal to the state's Commonwealth Court over a proposed AutoZone retail store at the intersection of Penn and S. Negley Aves. Once home to the "Babyland" business, the developer was denied a number of variances by the city in his attempt to build a prototypical building that many felt would look out of place on the street. A Common Pleas Court judge reversed the city's decision, however, barely addressing the legal reasoning the zoning board used in denying those variances. Commonwealth Court will be hearing oral arguments next month in the case.

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, securing financing, dealing with occupancy requirements, and finding solutions to other issues that could be hampering their operations. The BGC this year found tenants for new commercial storefronts in the 4800 block of Penn that will reinforce the corridor's emergence as an arts district. Leases were signed with Assemble, LevelUp Studios, and the Silver Eye Center for Photography. The BGC has also been the fiscal sponsor for Café Con Leche, a food and cultural project of Tara Sherry-Torres, that established a residency at Most Wanted Fine Art this year. BOOM Concepts, a shared workspace for minority artists and entrepreneurs at 5139 Penn, also receives support from the BGC, thanks to a grant from the Heinz Endowments.

The BGC also provided matching grants to building owners engaged in façade facelifts for properties at 4905 and 5152 Penn Avenue. The BGC also provided financial and technical assistance to the owner of the former Horoscope Lounge in the 5400 block of Penn in the planning the renovation of his property until he decided in August to put the building on the market for sale.

And, finally, the Penn Avenue Arts Initiative continues to host a year-round gallery crawl, *Unblurred*, on the first Friday of each month, together with the Garfield Night Market that runs from May to September, to bring residents and outsiders together with 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 sponsored by Most Wanted Fine Art.

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 membership includes 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 was the successful passage of legislation by the city to de-criminalize possession of small amounts of marijuana. This year, the re-emergence of gang-related activity in Garfield is drawing fresh attention from the task force.

As new restaurants come to the commercial district, BGC staff work with nearby neighbors to hammer out memoranda of understanding with the owners that encapsulates the management's policies around hours of operation and the use of any liquor licenses at the premises. Most recently, MOU's were executed with the owners of Spork, a new eatery in the 5400 block of Penn, and with the investors in a Primanti's Restaurant destined for the same block of Penn in early 2017.

The BGC also reviews a list of vacant, deteriorated houses each year with the city's Department of Permits, Inspections, and Licenses to assess which have become hazardous to the public, and then to push for their condemnation and eventual demolition. It is also moving aggressively to earmark as many tax-delinquent, vacant parcels as possible for public taking by city and their subsequent placement in a reserve for future development guided by the neighborhood.

The Western PA Conservancy and evolveArchitecture completed a plan for the community for a dedicated green zone in the upper part of Garfield. The city planning department has now agreed to formulate a request for proposals from potential consultants who can guide the neighborhood in preparation of a master plan for the first link in that zone, an expanded Fort Pitt Park that preserves the football field as a recreation amenity for years to come.

The BGC is also helping Garfield Community Farm with its acquisition of a dozen land parcels coming through the city's Vacant Property Reserve. The farm has only been able to lease them up until this point.

The Bulletin & Other Communications

One of the longest-standing projects 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 events and developments in Garfield, Friendship, Lawrenceville, East Liberty and Bloomfield, and the people shaping the change process in each of these neighborhoods. The paper has developed a loyal base of advertisers in the larger community who contribute over \$45,000 in revenue each year to its publication.

In addition to the newspaper, the BGC maintains a website, www.bloomfield-garfield.org, together with a blog, a Facebook page and Twitter account, that help the public at-large communicate and connect with us, and define a role they can play in making the neighborhood more safe and livable.

Support to Other Organizations & “Neighbors in Need”

The BGC lends its staff time and use of its 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 150 city residents find full- or part-time jobs between July of 2015 and this past June. The two Lawrenceville groups were able to sustain a community gardening program, provide outreach to seniors, and run a summer youth employment program, thanks to funds provided by the BGC.

The BGC also hosts the operation of “Neighbors in Need”, a fund raised by East End residents to help individuals and families in a serious financial crisis, or those who lack the funds for a need tied to their education, employment, or transportation to work. Thus far in 2016, 28 grants have been made, totaling \$15,133.

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 also like to thank all of our supporters for their contributions, as well as our program partners for providing the funds or other resources critical to sustaining our various programs or development projects.

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