

Weaving Collaboration to Mend a Community of Choice

A Report on Building Stronger Connections
among Four Key Strategic Areas in Kennedy Heights

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I. OVERVIEW

The stability of Kennedy Heights is not only important to the thousands of residents who live there, it critical to the vitality of the City of Cincinnati. It is one of only a handful of neighborhoods that have maintained a measure of racial and economic integration over the past 30 years. As city leaders aspire to reverse the trend of middle-class exodus from Cincinnati – and, indeed, to restore that population – it is critical that Kennedy Heights continue be a strong neighborhood of choice.

Fortunately, residents in Kennedy Heights are keenly aware of their unique status and responsibility. They also recognize that the responsibility of strengthening their neighborhood cannot be left to the hands of city officials. Rather than waiting for deliverance, resident leaders have aggressively taken on the challenge of restoring those core components of community life that are necessary to create stability. Dozens of residents are engaged in endeavors addressing safety, housing, commercial enterprise, beautification, youth development, the arts, education and more.

While many communities in Cincinnati are working hard to identify areas of need, devise strategies to address them, and mobilize citizens to implement those strategies, Kennedy Heights has effectively moved into action. Now, the challenge for Kennedy Heights is to bring the various activities that are underway into strategic alignment so that the potential for each is maximized.

Four key strategic areas

The Community Building Institute, as part of its ongoing contract to support the community building efforts in Kennedy Heights, set out to provide guidance as to how the core initiatives of the community might be better integrated with one another and how they might more effectively attract broad investment from the community. In conducting this work, CBI focused on four “key strategic areas.” They are: safety, business district revitalization, education, and the arts. To be sure, there are other efforts going on in the neighborhood to which residents are passionately committed. However, these four represent fundamental components of community life that have managed to foster a level of volunteer participation, financial support, institutional investment, and public awareness, that set them apart as having the potential to create momentum that leads to community transformation.

There is very little conflict among these four areas, although in some cases efforts have appeared to contradict one another because clear community consensus has not been reached or information has not been adequately shared from leaders of one area with another. And while there is some cooperation, there is not much strategic collaboration. The difference is significant. Cooperation is a kind of peaceful coexistence, with each area staying out of the way of the other and providing support when there is opportunity. Collaboration aggressively looks for unique ways to unite areas with shared responsibility, accountability and authority. Rather than simply sharing in the independent efforts of each area, collaboration spawns new initiatives, approaches and outcomes that would not otherwise exist.

Such collaboration is necessary for Kennedy Heights to move from merely executing successful projects to creating tangible, measurable community transformation. There is a tipping point communities reach that sends them either along a trend of decline or improvement. (It is almost impossible to merely hold in place for very long without moving either direction.) Tipping the

scale toward improvement, in light of the many challenges urban communities face, takes a comprehensive, focused plan that is sustained long enough to build the momentum and scale that to alter the trajectory of the community. Kennedy Heights has the potential to reach this soon. It will require, however, coordinated, collaborative work among the core areas driving action and change in the community.

II. SYNOPSES OF THE FOUR STRATEGIC AREAS

Safety

Kennedy Heights has several active and mature efforts aimed at addressing crime and safety in the community. These include the Community Problem Oriented Police effort and Citizens on Patrol. These groups work effectively together, with a few residents serving on both efforts. Some of their most significant successes include limiting disorderly activity on Kennedy at the bridge that crosses the railroad tracks and holding off development of a Beverage Cave retail establish at Kennedy and Montgomery, whose primary business would be to sell alcohol.

Leaders of the other major community initiatives are keenly aware of these safety efforts and understand how their success is fundamental to the community. The commercial strip along Montgomery Road, for instance, will need to be perceived as a safe area in order to attract new housing and business development. Indeed, the Beverage Cave battle has galvanized broad community participation and consensus as effectively as any other effort in the neighborhood. In addition, Kennedy Heights' safety initiatives are seen as a model for other communities around the city. Such recognition led to the neighborhood's selection as part of the 25 Cities Initiative aimed at drug prevention and treatment.

Challenges to be address:

- Despite enjoying relatively broad community participation, the safety effort struggles to enlist the families most closely connected to the youth who are involved, directly or indirectly, in much of the social disorder experienced in the community. An active drug trade, which involves community youth, is the source of many problems. It will be increasingly necessary to involve these young people, as well as their parents and guardians, into playing and active, leadership role in safety efforts in the community.
- Having severely weakened drug trade hot spots near Kennedy and Woodford, leaders will need to stay focused along Kennedy and nearby streets to prevent new drug trade areas from emerging or migrating to other sections of the neighborhood.
- New resident volunteers will be needed to sustain the moment of these safety areas, particularly Citizens on Patrol, which has suffered some volunteer losses in recent months. While it is important to rally the troops around large initiatives like the Beverage Cave, soldiers are needed in the trenches on an ongoing basis. Leadership involvement by more African American residents is particularly important.

Business district development

There is not a neighborhood plan more defined and focused than the one that outlines the development of the Montgomery Road business corridor, of which the intersection of Montgomery and Kennedy is the focal point. With support from Kinzelman Kline Gossman, a core group of leaders has published a plan within the past year that calls for the physical development of the community anchored by the business district.

The business development plan grew out of conversations with various stakeholders in the community. As such, it outlines in detail scenarios for redeveloping space that takes into account community goals around the arts, education and housing. Leaders have begun holding more specific conversations with Kennedy Heights Arts Center directors to make sure the plans compliment each other. It has been adopted by the Kennedy Heights Community Council.

Challenges

- While the plan has official community endorsement, has been published in the community newsletter, and has been discussed at council meetings, it is not necessarily well-known by community residents outside of the neighborhood's core leadership team. Sharing the plan in a way that is exciting and relevant to residents will be important in building community advocacy and investment in the plan.
- Implementation of the plan will require a coordinated effort that involves attracting public resources, acquiring land, influencing zoning changes, and other high-level initiatives. While the community has yet to commit to a timetable and define accountability for implementing these steps.
- There has not been not clear community consensus on certain elements of the plan. For instance, while the community has talked about scenarios involving the former Furniture Fair site, stakeholders have not reached a hard decision to actively and collectively pursue one particular development there. Creating this consensus will be necessary to pursue development strategies.

Education

Advocates for education in Kennedy Heights have for years pushed for a neighborhood school in the community. Residents have widely believed that a high-performing school, centrally located at Kennedy and Montgomery, which is available to all neighborhood children, offers the greatest opportunity of stabilizing the community's delicate racial and economic balance. Leaders have developed a thoughtful and rational case supporting such a school, generated community support for it, and promoted it vigorously to the CPS administration and school board.

In recent months, commitments by the district to create schools in neighboring Pleasant Ridge and Silverton have threatened the community's position. At the same time, the current superintendent has been publicly opposed to the plan and offered alternatives, though community leaders question the details of these offers. Meanwhile, the emergence of new school board leadership has reinvigorated community leaders who are now optimistic that an opportunity remains to make a compelling case to the district that will be received favorably.

Challenges:

- The shifts in school district leadership over the past year has left the community unclear on the precise positions held by various administrators and school board members as it relates to a future school in Kennedy Heights. Community leaders must get straight answers soon from district stakeholders in order to accurately assess its strategy going forward.
- Gathering accurate information from among community stakeholders also is important. Different community leaders have access to different pieces of information as it relates to a school, but often times this information has not been shared across leadership. For instance, community leaders talking with school board members about the Kennedy and Montgomery site have gained insight that seems to contradict information gained by commercial development leaders who have been talking to the district's real estate officials.
- A perception persists outside the neighborhood that broad community consensus does not exist regarding schools. This perception fails to recognize or undervalues the work that has taken place to generate and document support from hundreds of residents. At the same time, leaders have not adequately assessed the desires of Kennedy Heights parents who currently have children in Cincinnati Public Schools in order to strengthen its case and more broadly incorporate community support.

The Arts

The Kennedy Heights Arts Center has emerged as a focal point of community activism and pride. It has developed a level of programming that gives promise of it one day assuming a role as a convening space in the community. Programming efforts involving youth and domestic violence have helped define the Center as a community resource. Leaders of the center have reached out to churches and organizations for partnerships as well.

The focus on the arts also has provided a vehicle for building collaborative relationships with the Pleasant Ridge neighborhood. Leaders from the two communities have been in discussions about creating an arts district involving from assets in both communities. This has occurred despite the threat of competition for scarce programming resources and other tensions between the two communities.

Challenges:

- Though growing in popularity, the Arts Center still struggles to maintain a level of support and participation necessary to sustain its operation. This includes the need for volunteers, attendance and financial sponsorship. Broadening the base of community "investors" is essential.
- The Arts Center has not generated full investment among some segments of the community, including African American residents. While some programming *serves* this audience, its broad participation in the Arts Center needs to be strengthened.
- While the growing relationship with Pleasant Ridge arts advocates is positive, this partnership will need to be deepened – and relationships with other surrounding communities will need to be established – if the Arts Center is to meet its goal of enhancing the quality of life in the surrounding community through the arts.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS

CBI recommends that the Kennedy Heights Community Council lead the neighborhood in four activities that will help overcome the challenges above. CBI assistance, in accordance with our current agreement, is indicated. The recommendations, in order of priority, are:

1. **Convene an education summit of community leaders.** This should not be a mass community meeting. Rather, it should include three or four representatives from each of the four key strategic areas mentioned above and members of the KHCC Board of Trustees. The purpose of this gathering should be threefold:
 - Share all intelligence that has been gathered regarding prospect for school plans for the community, including the construction of a new school at Kennedy and Montgomery.
 - Reach clear consensus as to which plan the community will pursue based upon the intelligence gathered.
 - Devise a strategy for pursuing that plan.
2. **Conduct a leadership collaboration work session.** The purpose of the session will be to move leaders in the four areas beyond cordial cooperation to strategic collaboration. Attendees should be the most active residents and stakeholders from the four key strategic areas. Each group will have a chance to present to the others an explanation of its successes, goals, challenges and needs of its work. Each group will then consider one significant way that it might specifically contribute to each of other the groups and to identify one way it might benefit from their efforts. The end result will be a tight web of interrelated commitments to which each group can hold one the others accountable.

CBI is available to facilitate this half-day session.

3. **Establish a defined set of overarching, measurable community outcomes.** There is a saying in the business world: “You only work on what you measure.” This is becoming increasingly important to grassroots leadership as well. It is very difficult to sustain community passion and energy without a goal that can be verified when it is achieved. “Build a school at Kennedy and Montgomery,” has that kind of definition. “Do something about crime,” does not. Fortunately, the broad goals already have been defined by the community through the town hall meeting and other efforts in each area. The most important of these needs to be translated into measurable outcomes and communicated to the community, with updates on progress toward them given regularly.

This process could be part of an extended leadership summit or a shorter, stand-alone session. CBI is available to facilitate this.

4. **Conduct an asset inventory of residents’ interests and gifts in those sections of the community where participation is weak.** Every key strategic area is in need of enlisting participation, investment or information from corners of the community that have been less active in formal community efforts in recent years. Community leaders will need to go and engage them door-to-door. Such an endeavor will provide an opportunity to gather information from CPS parents and assess interest in the arts. This effort may be held as part of the neighborhood walks that several residents have shown an interest in conducting.

CBI is available to help with the design of an inventory process using community volunteers.