

## A Vision for East Liberty







## **A Vision for East Liberty**

East Liberty Development, Inc.

*Assisted by:*  
The Community Builders, Inc.  
Perkins Eastman Architects PC

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## CONTENTS

### 01 Introduction and Highlights

07

After years of decline, East Liberty is preparing to make a new beginning. With stronger leadership and community participation, a community planning process has addressed the emerging challenges and opportunities. *A Vision for East Liberty* outlines the community's vision and the steps to put the plan into action.

### 02 Community Profile

17

A brief look at East Liberty today shows that it is a culturally and racially diverse neighborhood with a rich heritage. However, the neighborhood has a large population of economically-disadvantaged households and a distressed business district. Because of the "sub-urban renewal" of the 1960's, the neighborhood is physically fragmented into three disconnected parts.

### 03 Planning Process

25

The process that has led to *A Vision for East Liberty* was initiated and conducted by East Liberty Development Inc. (ELDI). The involvement of more than 150 neighborhood residents, business owners, and stakeholders has made this plan possible. In community meetings and task forces, a vision for East Liberty was crafted and guiding principles for development were identified. The planning process does not end with this document: the plan is a framework for the ongoing projects of focused studies and specific development strategies that will shape the revitalization of the neighborhood.

### 04 A Vision for East Liberty

29

From a comparison of several possible futures for East Liberty, community participants chose the concept of "A Town in a City" as the most promising direction for the neighborhood. Building on the elements of a town — business, neighborhoods, parks, cultural institutions, etc. — that East Liberty already has, the vision seeks to capitalize on the unique resources that will differentiate it from other communities.

### 05 Implementation Strategies

39

To make East Liberty's vision a reality, new housing needs to be built, older buildings need to be renovated, streets constructed, parks re-designed, and much more. This is ELDI's real estate development agenda, an ambitious undertaking for ELDI and the partnerships that ELDI will organize to accomplish these goals.

### 06 Community Empowerment

51

One of the first important steps toward realizing East Liberty's vision is the formation of a broadly representative Community Council to bring neighborhood interest groups to consensus on planning and policy issues. With the Council in place, ELDI will be able to serve more effectively as the community "bricks and mortar" developer. Partnerships involving the City and organizations from both inside and outside the neighborhood will be critical to turning East Liberty's vision into a reality.



## INTRODUCTION AND HIGHLIGHTS



*A Vision for East Liberty* is not a blueprint. It is a long-term framework for revitalization. Its purpose is to guide the ever-evolving process of planning and development toward the community's goals.

Most importantly *A Vision for East Liberty* is the work of the community. It is what community stakeholders want for East Liberty. It begins to define an agenda for the neighborhood's leadership and a source of accountability for the community's own organizations as well as for its partners, city agencies and private supporters.

East Liberty's community plan is not, nor ever can be, "final." If it is to be an effective guide and statement of principles that truly represents the voice of the community, it will have to be re-examined, revised and updated regularly. This ongoing planning function should be an integral function of East Liberty's community-based leadership organizations, bringing together the many interests and resources that will create East Liberty's new vitality and sustain it in the future.

This section summarizes East Liberty's vision.

- **Historical Background**
- **A New Beginning**
- **Opportunities and Challenges**
- **Critical Concerns**
- **A New Vision**
- **Action Steps**





## Historical Background

The rise and fall of East Liberty is a familiar story in Pittsburgh. A thriving commercial center in the 1940's and 1950's, Pittsburgh's "Second Downtown" declined rapidly in the 1960's after an ambitious urban renewal program.

Only a few decades ago, East Liberty was the third largest business district in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Boasting six movie houses, a department store, a roller skating arena and too many retail shops to count, East Liberty was a booming business district. Increases in pedestrian and vehicular congestion, building density and scale, and lack of parking, as well as new competition from the suburbs led to a call for change from East Liberty's business leaders.

That change became one of the nation's largest urban renewal projects and ultimately brought about the demise of the once vibrant community. The ill-fated urban renewal

project was an attempt to suburbanize East Liberty by an organization of visionary businessmen working with Pittsburgh's city government.

Believing that they could compete successfully with suburban development, they destroyed the tightly-knit urban fabric to make way for large one-story retail buildings, huge parking lots, and wide access roads. They demolished entire blocks of houses and commercial property. The core of the business district was converted into a pedestrian mall. Traffic patterns were reorganized so that they efficiently took people around and away from the business district. The creation of more than 1400 government-subsidized rental units destroyed a long tradition of neighborhood home ownership.

Spanning fifteen years, the disruption from construction and dislocation was the beginning of the decline in both the commercial and the residential communities.



East Liberty in the 1930's was a vibrant commercial center, but that vitality is missing today.

No longer able to sustain themselves, businesses closed or moved. Entire generations of families relocated to adjacent neighborhoods or close-by suburbs. Streets and neighborhood blocks were literally gone, replaced by a highway-sized ring road and vast parking lots around the commercial core. Retail life in the heart of the community was choked off by its inaccessibility. Most of the new suburban development around the circle has failed, leaving a moat of vacant sites and empty expanses of cracked pavement.

During the same period, racial and economic change created rifts in the neighborhood and deepened the divide between the business owners and the residents, between homeowners and renters, and between old and young.

For over twenty years, decline, dissension and mistrust have prevailed in East Liberty. Community leadership has been fragmented, unable to agree on a strategy to reverse the decline. While there was always the potential for recovery, failure to come together as a community made it impossible to attract private investment and public redevelopment dollars.

Today, as in any point in time, East Liberty has many options for the future and choices to be made. The only way to insure that the changes produce a better neighborhood is to develop a shared vision — a concept for the future that residents in the neighborhood believe in, that community leaders act upon, and that the city and others outside the neighborhood support. From a shared vision come revitalization goals and the strategies to realize those goals.



A vibrant commercial center in the 1930's, the sidewalks in East Liberty looked very different from the same sidewalks today.



## A New Beginning



In the last two years, East Liberty has acquired new leadership and a new sense of urgency in tackling old problems. Overcoming the fragmentation and division that has characterized East Liberty through decades of decline has become a top priority for the community.

East Liberty has united to bring about significant redevelopment projects.

East Liberty's new beginning is being seen today in five new initiatives that are changing the face of the neighborhood.

These successes indicate real progress and commitment to improve East Liberty. Building on these positive developments, other opportunities and challenges have brought together neighborhood residents, business and property owners and other stakeholders to focus on long-range solutions.





**New Pennley Place**, the redevelopment of a 314-unit distressed multifamily property as a mixed-income residential development (now under construction) is the first step in re-knitting the residential fabric of the neighborhood and re-connecting it with its commercial center.



The **Spinning Plate** at the corner of Baum Boulevard and Penn Circle is a conversion by Artists and Cities of the vacant Constantin Pontiac structure into live and work spaces for artists.



The development of a **Home Depot** store at the former Sears site will be completed in early 2000. This project promises to bring jobs with good wages and other benefits such as work force development programs to the community.



**Big Brothers and Big Sisters of Greater Pittsburgh** have set up their headquarters in East Liberty by renovating and occupying a commercial building which previously stood empty across from Motor Square Garden.



The **Farmers Market**, established in East Liberty in 1998, brings fresh affordable produce to the neighborhood.

## Opportunities and Challenges

The opportunities for change in East Liberty are numerous. In particular, East Liberty now has major assets that are key ingredients of positive change.

First, East Liberty has new leadership and a stronger neighborhood-based development capacity. East Liberty Development Incorporated (ELDI), the neighborhood's community development corporation, has nearly twenty years of real estate development experience. By forming partnerships with public spirited developers such as The Community Builders and non-profit community-based development corporations, ELDI is building its capacity in all type of real estate development.

East Liberty's second asset is the amount of land available for development. Underutilized land, in the form of parking and vacant or deteriorated properties, creates a potential for reuniting residential blocks with the commercial center.

Third is the support from the city government and political leadership. Mayor Murphy has indicated that redeveloping East Liberty is a priority and that collaborative action can bring in needed resources to support its revitalization. City-sponsored retail and transportation studies are in progress, along with programs to redevelop housing, increase commercial investment, and improve the quality of life.



The movement towards change in East Liberty also faces many challenges. First, in line with new federal policy, the Pittsburgh Housing Authority will demolish 24% of its existing public housing units including the elderly high rises in the community, Auburn Towers and Garfield Heights high-rise. These demolitions will require tenant relocation and construction of new senior housing. Also, further physical decline and financial destabilization of public housing and continued shrinkage of subsidies to private property owners will result in poor housing conditions unless pre-emptive action is taken.

A more immediate challenge has been created by the new federal welfare laws that have imposed strict time limits and work requirements on recipients, forcing individuals and communities to take up the challenge of welfare-to-work transition. Benefit terminations may have a dramatic impact on East Liberty and other Pittsburgh neighborhoods over the next few years.

The isolation of the commercial district from nearby residential areas and the concentration of a low-income population in these areas continues to undermine its viability. Cuts in government benefit programs will further limit disposable income of subsidized housing dwellers to support retail activity in the commercial core.

Lastly, there is a widely-held perception that crime is rampant in the community. In reality, total crimes have dropped 32% between 1993 and 1996.

These challenges demand both long-term strategies and immediate action to prevent accelerated decline. With concerted action among community leaders, residents, city officials and funders, East Liberty can minimize the negative impact of these changes and seize opportunities to realize a new vision for the community.



## Critical Concerns

In summary, several critical concerns demand attention:

"Sub-urban renewal" destroyed much of East Liberty's physical and social structure. Suburban retail development failed to attract shoppers and contributed to the decline of the surrounding residential neighborhoods.

East Liberty now houses 1400 units of government-assisted housing in large superblock multifamily housing developments. These properties are distressed, marked by deteriorated conditions and an absence of economic diversity.

In the traditional residential areas, there is a low and declining level of home ownership, compared to other areas of the city.

Planned public housing demolition will create need for new housing in the community. Housing in East Liberty should be designed as an integral part of the neighborhood, not as separate projects.

Penn Circle, which routes traffic around the business district, has isolated the commercial core from the surrounding neighborhoods. It discourages access into the commercial district, disorients visitors, inconveniences local occupants, and is hazardous to pedestrians.

The commercial core is now dominated by low-end retailers. The limited selection, along with fears for public safety, decreases its attractiveness to regional shoppers.

Unemployment stands above citywide levels, with many residents lacking skills and education necessary to secure available jobs.

Local schools need substantial improvement in order to attract more families to the neighborhood.

Local media practices create an exaggerated perception of crime in East Liberty.



Auburn Towers is one of the public housing projects slated for demolition.



The Penn Circle Highway makes East Liberty look bleak and empty.



## A New Vision

Over the past two years, community stakeholders have engaged in creating the East Liberty community plan. The planning process was organized and led by East Liberty Development Incorporated. The participants in the planning process envision East Liberty as a Town in a City, a small-scale full-service neighborhood within the larger city of Pittsburgh. Drawing on East Liberty's heritage and history as a vibrant cultural and commercial hub, it can become a thriving urban community that offers commerce, employment, recreation, services, good schools and diverse housing choices. By recreating the person-friendly quality of a traditional neighborhood, East Liberty will appeal to households and businesses that are looking for the advantages of small town life with the conveniences of an urban setting.

To realize this vision will mean:

- Reclaiming transitional areas left from urban renewal for vital commercial and housing purposes.
- Constructing new housing in the scale and character of a small town for a diverse population.
- Reconnecting residential neighborhoods to the historic core using traditional street grids and parks.
- Planning and implementing new commercial developments that strengthen the historic commercial core.
- Broadening the mix of businesses to include restaurants, entertainment venues, general merchandising, and professional firms to serve both local and regional markets.
- Linking residents with relevant job training and educational programs that prepare for good employment opportunities.
- Creating a community governance structure to advocate and direct neighborhood revitalization efforts over the long term.



East Liberty as the "Town in a City," a vibrant community with a prosperous commercial center linked to flourishing neighborhoods.

## Action Steps

While much of the plan addresses long-term strategies, eight key steps must be taken to put this plan into action. Each of these action steps involves coordination between

neighborhood leadership and partners such as the Department of City Planning, the URA, HUD, and commercial interests. These action steps should form ELDI's short-term agenda.



- 1.** Replace distressed housing with a variety of mixed income alternatives. Complete redevelopment of New Pennley Place, rebuilding houses to face streets and reconnecting neighborhood streets.
- 2.** Insure responsible ownership and redevelopment of Federal American Properties, a portfolio of 644 units in three poorly managed, at-risk subsidized properties on sixteen acres of land. Provide good quality replacement housing in scale with the neighborhood.
- 3.** Develop a housing strategy that incorporates diverse options for senior housing. Work with responsible management organizations to create a continuum of care settings affordable to elderly neighborhood residents.
- 4.** Implement neighborhood stabilization programs in residential areas involving home improvement, beautification, and targeted acquisition and rehabilitation of housing. Focus initial activity on the main boulevards in East Liberty, which offer the most visible evidence of revitalization.
- 5.** Outline a strategy to undo Penn Circle and work with the City and State to allocate resources to extend and connect the street grid.







**6.** Begin planning for retail/commercial development at the busway hub. The busway is currently an underutilized economic resource in the community. The busway could serve as a community link to regional jobs, as well as reinforce the activity at the commercial core. The feasibility of developing a retail business, hotel, and entertainment complex at the busway should be investigated.

**7.** Design and deliver comprehensive work force development programs to enable residents to meet new welfare requirements and pursue new neighborhood and other employment opportunities. Residents must be full participants in regional economic development to create self-sustaining households.

**8.** Create a volunteer community council to develop the community vision, build on it, and oversee its implementation. The council should be broadly representative of the East Liberty community, drawing in residents, community leaders, business leaders, organizations, and key partners with a stake in the neighborhood's future.





## COMMUNITY PROFILE



This section describes the physical, economic and social characteristics of East Liberty and the people who live, work, shop and play within its boundaries.

- **People in East Liberty**
- **The Character of the Place**
- **Commercial Core**
- **Transition Zone**
- **Residential Neighborhoods**
- **Human Services**

## People in East Liberty

East Liberty's historical census data reveal a community that has been in transition over the last several decades. Since 1980, East Liberty has lost over 18% of its population while the city as a whole has lost 21%. Owner-occupancy decreased by 25% over a 20 year period. Despite the decline in homeowners, community residents continue to include a broad mix of ages and income levels. The chart to the right compares the 1998 census statistics for East Liberty and the City of Pittsburgh as a whole.

1998 Census Data	East Liberty	City
population	7,226	341,796
median household income	\$17,221	\$26,082
african-american	67.1%	27.7%
over age 55	27.7%	26.9%
under age 25	25.9%	31.5%

Source: 1998 Claritas Estimates

East Liberty has a long history as a socially and racially diverse community. Local churches, social organizations, and institutions have taken pride in their diverse constituencies and worked hard to improve social and cultural relationships within the community. East Liberty's residential neighborhoods are some of the most racially integrated in the city. This diversity has produced a rich cultural history, a point of pride in the community.

However, despite its social diversity, socio-economic indicators such as low educational attainment, high teenage pregnancy, high unemployment, and a 30% poverty rate signal distress.

Neighborhood schools are plagued with low achievement and loss of students. Both Peabody High School and Reizenstein Middle School have seen dramatic decreases in student population over the past several years. Following several incidents of violent gang activity at the high school, and poor student performance at both schools, families have turned to other educational options. Many neighborhood children now attend public school magnet programs or private schools to avoid these neighborhood schools.



Peabody High School and Florence Reizenstein Middle School have seen decreases in student population.



## The Character of the Place



Once a town surrounded by farms, East Liberty is now in the heart of Pittsburgh's East End. On the north, East Liberty is bounded by Highland Park at Stanton Avenue. To the west of Negley Avenue are Garfield and Friendship. To the east of Negley Run and East Liberty Boulevard is Larimer and to the south of the busway is Shadyside.

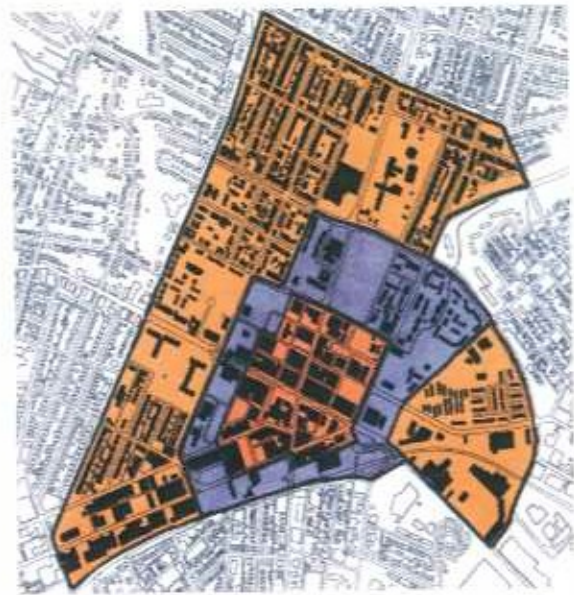
East Liberty is not directly accessible from any regional highways. The busway is East Liberty's best connection to Downtown and eastern neighborhoods. Its eventual extension will connect East Liberty directly to the airport and other regional transportation systems.

From its earliest days, East Liberty has been linked to the city by Penn Avenue, its east-west "Main Street." Highland Avenue is the north-south street that connects East Liberty to Highland Park and Shadyside. The intersection of Penn and Highland Avenues is the center of East Liberty, the "prime corner" of its central business district. It is marked by the magnificent cathedral building of the East Liberty Presbyterian Church.

Because of East Liberty's flat topography, its streets were generally laid out in a regular grid pattern. Exceptions occur along the railroad track/busway to the south and on the

east where the adjoining neighborhood was laid out on a differently oriented grid. Penn Circle, the four-way one-lane loop highway around the business district, interrupts the pattern. The disruption of the "circle" is exacerbated by the expanse of large parking lots that line it.

East Liberty today is divided into three distinct physical zones. Its inner core is its commercial center, the historic heart of East Liberty. Around the core is a ring of parking lots and suburban development that is referred to as the "transition zone." This is the area between the denser fabric of the commercial center and the outer ring of residential blocks. The residential area consists of traditional streets and blocks that have maintained most of their small-scale residential character. The next few pages take a closer look at these three areas.



Map Key:

- Residential Area
- Transition Zone
- Commercial Core



## Commercial Core

Most of Pittsburgh's neighborhoods have their own local neighborhood business district, but East Liberty's business district is more like a densely built multi-use urban "downtown" district with round-the-clock activity.

In 1996, five hundred forty-five (545) businesses occupied the greater East Liberty business district. Half of the current businesses fall under the category of service providers, with health services (physicians, dentists, etc.) making up over 25%, or 126 of the service businesses. The next largest grouping was personal services (beauty salons, etc.) at 7%, or 41 businesses.

Once home to jazz clubs, theaters, and a thriving night life, the cultural vitality of East Liberty has ebbed.

A number of specialty shops such as antique dealers and African-American retailers continue to draw customers. But the district has a negative image today with a concentration of lower-end retail shops occupying prime business district storefronts. A survey of shoppers indicates that better security, more convenient public parking spaces, more specialty stores, as well as restaurants and entertainment venues would draw more shoppers to the area.



## Transition Zone

The transition zone is a ring of underdeveloped land that resulted from urban renewal. Along with creating Penn Circle as a limited-access loop road, large multi-block parcels of land were aggregated by cutting off public streets and vacating them for private development. Eventually, housing projects and suburban-type commercial buildings were built amidst large parking lots that are little used today. Much of this housing, both high-rise and low-rise, is in poor condition, open spaces are badly maintained, and some of the commercial buildings are vacant. The Home Depot project occupies one of the largest sites in the transition zone.

Also in the transition zone are several highly prominent distressed properties. The large multifamily high-rise developments (East Mall, Penn Circle, and Liberty Park) now owned by Federal American Properties, house predominantly low-income African-American tenants in obsolete structures in the center of East Liberty.



Many of the structures in the transition zone lie empty and deteriorating.



The Penn Circle and Liberty Park high-rises are privately owned, government-subsidized buildings that have been poorly managed and badly maintained.



## Residential Neighborhoods

The northern and western blocks of East Liberty comprise a relatively stable residential area that was for the most part untouched by the physical changes made during the 1960's. The exceptions are the Pennley Park/Plaza development and East Liberty Boulevard, which was cut through at that time. An area of houses and small apartment buildings, it also contains East Liberty's major educational institutions, Peabody High School and the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary.

Some of the houses in this area have been subdivided into apartments, but the homeownership rate is still higher than any other part of East Liberty. Many of the houses are occupied by elderly residents. These areas contain architecturally attractive houses with the potential to expand home ownership opportunities for younger households while creating more senior housing options.



There are many architecturally attractive houses in the residential neighborhoods of East Liberty.

The three census tracts in East Liberty are seen below. Tracts 818 and 1113 house primarily the residential neighborhoods. Tract 1115 is in the transition zone. The chart gives an overview of the three residential census tracts in East Liberty and compares them to that of the City of Pittsburgh as a whole.



### Single-Family Residential Brief

Tracts	818	1113	1115	City
Median Household Income*	\$19,583	\$19,939	\$15,275	\$26,262
Population Over 55 Years*	36.4%	26.7%	26%	27.2%
Renter Occupied Units	82%	62.4%	78%	43.1%
Owner Occupied Units	4%	23.8%	22%	47.1%
Vacant Housing	14%	13.8%	10.7%	9.8%
Median House Unit Value	\$50,714	\$35,729	\$36,956	\$41,164
Total Housing Units	980	1720	2074	170,159
Subsidized Rental Units			1400	
Median Rent			\$372	
Households With Income Below \$10,000			33%	
Age of Rental Complexes			30+ years	

Sources: \*1997 Claritas Estimates  
1990 U.S. Census



## Human Services

A large number of social service agencies provide a wide variety of human services in the community. Services include literacy programs, drug and alcohol treatment centers, residential care services, programs for youth, daycare centers, and senior citizen services.

There are a variety of organizations and agencies that provide counseling, family help, and social services. Two foster care agencies in the area are A Second Chance and Alternative Program Associates. The Domestic Abuse Counseling Center provides domestic violence treatment for court- and socially- mandated adult men who are abusive. The Pittsburgh Assessment and Consultation Center provides psychological services, while Whale's Tale provides crisis intervention and counseling services for teens and their families. The Pittsburgh Peace Institute provides education on non-violence, violence prevention, and other related programs.

East End Cooperative Ministries performs a wide range of community services, including hunger and homelessness programs, a men's shelter, a soup kitchen, bridge housing for homeless men, a food pantry, elderly programs, children and youth programs, and a residential program for addicted women and their children. Transitional Services provides housing and rehabilitation services for mentally disabled or mentally retarded adults. The East Liberty Family Health Care Center serves the community's medical needs with a general family practice, home health care, and health education programs. Health care providers focusing on reproductive services, family planning, and prenatal care include the Family Health Council, Family Planning Service of East Liberty, and Healthy Start, Inc.

The Greater Pittsburgh Literary Council provides basic math, reading, and writing instruction, job preparation, and English as a second language tutoring. Job matching and placement, job training, career/labor market information, and transportation services are provided by the Pittsburgh East Job Center and the PA Job Corps. The Kingsley Association runs a summer day camp for 7- to 12-year old youth offering computer courses, as well as recreational and educational programs primarily for the youth in the area. The organization also offers an entrepreneurial training program and an African Heritage program. Big Brothers/Big Sisters opened a new regional office in East Liberty in 1999.

The programs of the Vintage Senior Citizens' Center include recreation, education, social activities, lunch, home delivered meals, a health clinic, medical transportation, legal consultation, and volunteer opportunities. The YMCA Senior Aides Program provides job placement, training, and community service opportunities for adults aged 55 years or older.



Many social service agencies including organizations that provide activities for the children exist in East Liberty.



## THE PLANNING PROCESS



*A Vision for East Liberty* lays out a community vision for change. It is the core document in an ongoing series of planning and strategy documents. Planning for East Liberty's future is one of ELDI's ongoing responsibilities. It does not stop with this document or any other document. *A Vision for East Liberty* is a framework for strategies and action plans to address specific areas such as housing, commercial development, traffic, economic development and education.

This section summarizes the planning process undertaken by members of the East Liberty community.

- **Organization of the Process**
- **Community Meetings**
- **Task Forces**



## Organization of the Process

Facing the opportunities and challenges outlined in the introduction, ELDI initiated a community planning process in 1996. East Liberty had not had a comprehensive community plan since the 1960's, when "top-down" urban renewal planning drastically reshaped the area. ELDI brought residents, business owners, service organizations and elected officials together to identify issues, problems and priorities for action in a community-based planning process. The task was to create a shared vision of a healthy, inclusive community. The planning process succeeded in bringing the many and often divided segments of the community together to create a vision for East Liberty.

The planning process served several purposes:

- Bringing diverse community stakeholders together to exchange ideas about improving the community
- Identifying problems and generating new ideas
- Engaging citizens to imagine a better future and work towards it

To facilitate the transition from planning to action, this document seeks to:

- Capture the energy and ideas of the participants
- Document the community's vision and principles to guide the actions of private and public actors
- Provide guidance to community leaders faced with development proposals
- Present funders and investors with a compelling call for action and investment in neighborhood development projects
- Focus attention on immediate steps necessary to avert decline and stimulate revitalization

While many of the ideas in this plan will evolve into projects over the long term, it is clear from the looming threats posed by changes in the welfare system and federal housing subsidy policy that certain immediate actions are necessary to prevent further rapid decline.

## Community Meetings

In December of 1996 the first of three community meetings was convened. The series of meetings attracted well over a hundred and fifty participants from East Liberty, as well as interested residents and business owners from adjoining neighborhoods.

At the first community meeting, the planning process was discussed. The starting point for the process was sharing ideas about a neighborhood vision. Alternative "futures" were presented and compared. Participants agreed on a vision of East Liberty as a traditional town, undoing the effects of urban renewal and recreating a close-knit, well-cared-for, person-friendly community.

Participants then generated a list of issues that East Liberty faces in order to realize that vision and potential resources to address those issues. The strengths and weaknesses of the neighborhood were recorded.

Participants concluded by prioritizing the issues into seven major categories: Housing, Business, Transportation, Neighborhood Environment, Education and Jobs, Children/Youth, and Public Safety.



The task forces got together to share ways in which the issues identified at the first meeting could be addressed.

Discussion focused on issues raised by members of the East Liberty community.



The second community meeting brought participants together to organize task forces to address these issues. Because some of the issues are so closely inter-related, it was decided that four task forces would be formed to define a set of goals for the neighborhood.

These task forces were:

- Business and Economic Development
- Youth, Social Issues, and Public Safety
- Housing
- Physical Environment and Image

The third community meeting was held to report on the work of each of the task forces and to provide an outline of the guiding principles as well as short-term and long-term goals for dealing with the task force issue.



## Task Forces

Each task force was chaired by a planning process participant. Along with other participants who volunteered for a task force, the chairperson was charged with bringing on other resource people from both inside and

outside the neighborhood. The task forces met every two weeks until they had generated a set of neighborhood goals related to their topic and contributed ideas toward overall guiding principles for the plan.



### Business and Economic Development

- economic conditions
- physical conditions
- social conditions
- making business more successful in East Liberty



### Social Services, and Public Safety

- supporting youth and families
- health
- family relations
- childcare
- care for the elderly
- services for those with special needs
- education
- reducing crime against persons or property
- crime prevention



### Physical Environment and Image

- quality of overall neighborhood environment
- traffic and parking
- transit service
- parks
- vandalism and litter control
- safe/user-friendly pedestrian systems
- public perception of East Liberty Youth,



### Housing

- improving the quality of housing
- availability of housing for renters and home owners
- improving conditions of existing housing
- developing new housing strategy
- attracting market-rate renters and buyers

## A Vision for East Liberty



It has been said that a community without a vision cannot survive. It certainly cannot prosper. A vision is the community's "pole star," a bright light that even at a great distance guides the steps along the way.

Urban planning participants weighed the alternatives of reconstructing East Liberty as an urban neighborhood or continuing the suburbanization of urban renewal. They chose the goal of reconstructing East Liberty's traditional fabric. The community has chosen to become the "Town in a City," a close-knit community linked together both physically and socially.

- **Creating a Vision for the Future**
- **East Liberty: The Town in a City**
- **Revitalization Principles**
- **Commercial Development Principles**
- **Residential Development Principles**
- **Economic Development Principles**
- **Human Development Principles**



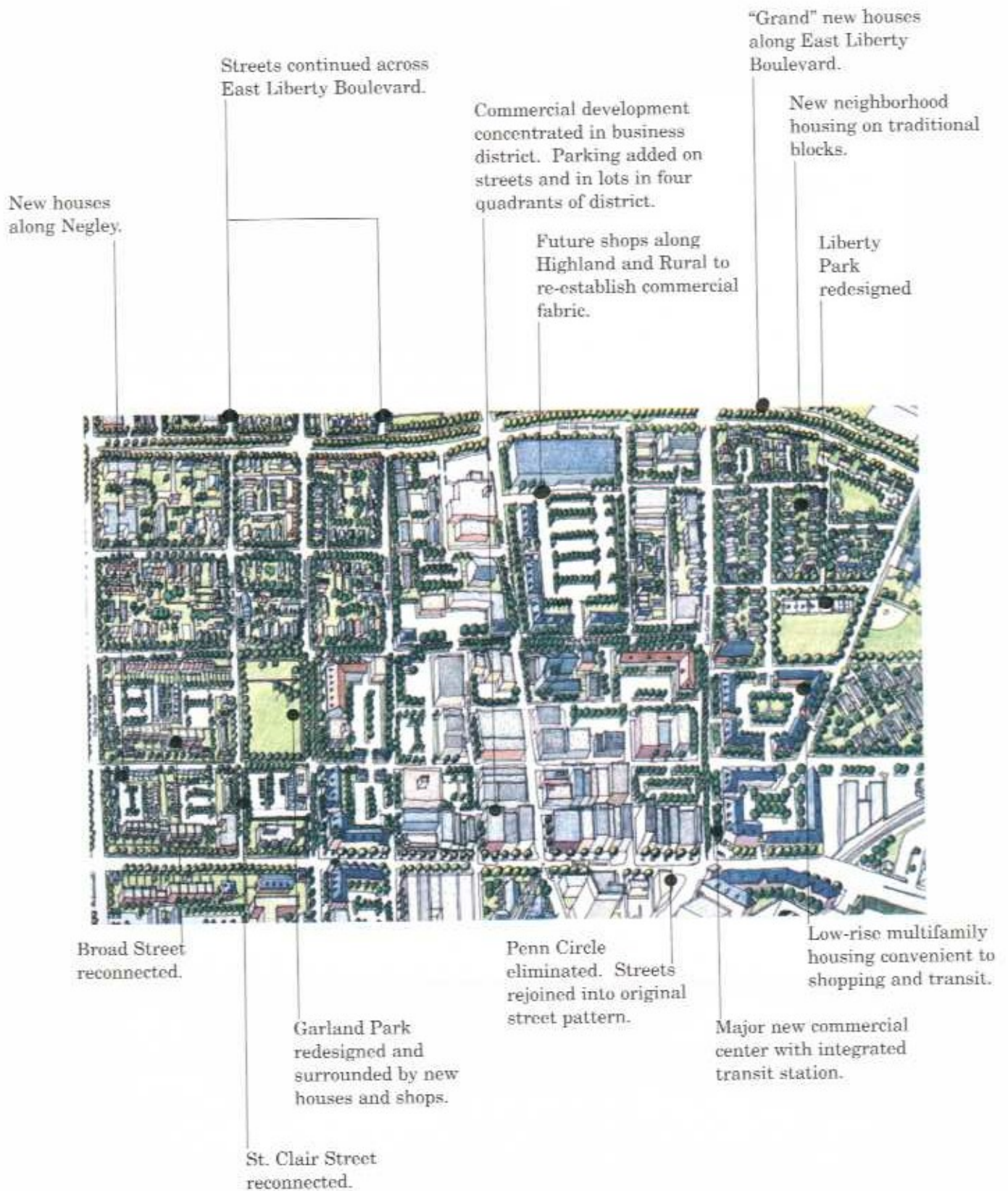
## Creating a Vision for the Future

The participants in the planning process envisioned East Liberty as a "Town in a City," a small-scale, full-service community set within the larger city of Pittsburgh. Drawing on East Liberty's heritage and history as a vibrant cultural and commercial hub, the vision describes a community that brings together commerce, employment, recreation, services, good schools, and diverse housing choices. With its human scale and person-friendly environment, East Liberty will appeal to households drawn to a traditional American small town within a diverse urban setting. In re-creating itself as a town, East Liberty

aspires to preserve and enhance its finest features, its diverse cultural and economic base, its wide mix of businesses and social and religious organizations, and its friendly, small-town feel. Good design quality is integral to the new vision, whether it is in the creation of affordable rental housing or major retail outlet stores. The revitalized community will offer an inviting mix of housing, stores, restaurants, theaters, clubs, churches, schools, offices and manufacturing facilities, serving not only community residents but also others who come from other parts of the region to work, shop, dine or visit friends.



When the high-rise apartments that now stand over Penn Avenue are replaced with new low-rise housing, Penn Avenue will be a continuous connection between downtown East Liberty and surrounding neighborhoods.





## East Liberty: The Town in a City



What makes a great Town in a City? A traditional town has social, economic, and physical qualities that make it a memorable and attractive place — qualities that are embodied in East Liberty's vision. To become a "Town in a City," East Liberty will work to become...

...a close-knit community, with a stable population and strong community institutions. The neighborhood will pride itself on creating a beautiful and well-maintained environment, a pleasant and convenient place that invites neighborly activities.

...more than a neighborhood...a place for work, school, entertainment, shopping, recreation — the many kinds of places and activities that make a whole community. East Liberty's "downtown" will be developed to serve the city and region as well as the local neighborhood, bringing more employment and amenities to local residents than a neighborhood commercial district could provide.

...a city place, with streets and sidewalks — not highways; with blocks — not superblocks; with parking along streets and front doors along sidewalks — not facing large parking lots. East Liberty will make the most of its urban heritage, rather than trying to imitate the suburbs.

... a source of new economic growth. A new mixed-income population will create a market for housing, services, and shopping. Investment in education and work force development will create new employment opportunities. Economically secure households, along with the changing neighborhood image, will attract larger markets for retail development and business expansion.



The Home Depot site, once the Sears' site (photo above), will have the largest parking lot in East Liberty. In the future, other small commercial buildings, like Vento's Pizza, can be built along Highland and Rural Street (Penn Circle North) to link the Home Depot store to the commercial center of East Liberty (drawing above).

This vision draws on many of East Liberty's strengths:

Central location in the East End.

Existing mix of local and specialty businesses.

Vital center for African-American culture.

Variety of housing types and prices.

Achieving the goal of a healthy, mixed-income community in East Liberty will depend on several critical accomplishments:

- Reclaiming the transitional area left over from urban renewal for vital commercial and residential purposes. Building a market for mid-priced houses.
- Building new housing that is in scale and character of a small town while providing affordable and quality housing opportunities for East Liberty residents.
- Connecting the residential neighborhoods to the historic core using traditional street grids.
- Planning and implementing new commercial development that strengthens



rather than competes with the historic business district

- Increasing the capacity of local schools to deliver high quality education.
- Building the educational and skill levels of existing residents and providing them the support they need to participate in East Liberty's revitalization.

This vision can be realized incrementally over time, expanding areas of strength, in the business district and neighborhood, and transforming areas of opportunity, in the transition zone between the historic core and the residential neighborhoods.





## Revitalization Principles

A central goal of redevelopment efforts is to eliminate the transition area, restoring the traditional street grid to knit together residential neighborhoods and the commercial core. In doing so, underutilized land can be reclaimed and targeted for mixed residential and commercial use for business expansions as well as for new housing varying from low-cost replacement units to market rate units.

The community plan will be realized through a revitalization process guided by principles that have been generated by the task forces and focus groups in the planning process. These principles provide the general framework for change and link the community's vision to the specific implementation strategies that will be outlined in upcoming strategy documents.

### Overall Principles:

Build on strengths of existing neighborhood fabric and commercial core. Emphasize unique features and cultural heritage. Preserve buildings that have architectural character.

Redesign Penn Circle and re-establish local street network with two-way streets and on-street parking. Connect the commercial core with surrounding neighborhood areas.

Locate new buildings along street fronts with fronts oriented to public right of way. Create continuity among buildings, so that they contribute to a sense of "wholeness" on a block and from block to block. Keep parking lots to the interior of blocks. Add on-street parking for businesses.

Design buildings for "big box" sites that are street-oriented and appropriate to the architectural character of the commercial district.

Improve and maintain the public environment of East Liberty, control graffiti and litter, and execute beautification projects that change the image of the community and enhance its livability.

Create a new positive public image of East Liberty as a safe, attractive, and cohesive community.

Establish an East Liberty Community Council to guide planning toward the "vision" and oversee the process of implementation.

## Commercial Development Principles

East Liberty's commercial 'heart' should be reinforced as a unique district that serves both nearby residents and a regional market. Revitalization of the business district will involve a combination of real estate development and business development strategies.

- Reinforce East Liberty's commercial core as a pedestrian-friendly 'downtown' shopping district with businesses and institutions that serve a regional population.
- Capitalize on the East Liberty Busway Station and explore development potential as mixed-use transit hub.
- Develop parking that relates to and supports retail uses. Avoid large parking lots along sidewalks.
- Attract and retain businesses that appeal to a regional market; create opportunities for foot traffic throughout the community.
- Create an environment which encourages business activity into the evening hours.
- Explore reuse of key buildings within the community such as the Regent Theatre, the Highland Building, and the Liberty Building.
- Develop business sites that are accessible to people in the neighborhood as well as outside of the community.
- Explore effective use of vacant buildings and vacant upper floors.
- Undertake beautification, streetscape improvements, and marketing efforts.



Today the view of East Liberty from the busway station, where over ten thousand people travel each day, is empty and uninviting (photo above). The centerpiece of new commercial development at the busway transit center is a mixed-use building that faces Centre Avenue. The new development would anchor Penn Avenue at the heart of East Liberty would bring a combination of new retail, office, entertainment, and hotel uses to this key location (drawing above).



## Residential Development Principles

The vision for East Liberty is comprised in large part of strengthening and expanding traditional neighborhoods. The Housing Task Force stated that the overall goal of housing development should be to:

- Preserve, enhance, and extend the residential character of the community and improve the overall neighborhood quality. Maintain and improve housing on existing residential blocks.
- Reduce the level of irresponsible property ownership; take control of key properties to improve physical conditions and the quality of management.
- Promote home ownership opportunities as a tool to increase neighborhood stability and improve the balance between homeowners and renters.

With respect to residential development in the transitional area, the Task Force identified the following principles to guide efforts to reconnect the area to the existing community fabric.

- Recreate a residential character. Demolish distressed housing and develop new mixed-income housing that extends and reinforces the neighborhood residential scale.
- Plan for "defensible" spaces in public areas.

- Redevelop "superblocks" to include a traditional street grid that allows residents easy access to the business district.
- Minimize displacement of existing residents and prepare them to take advantage of new housing rental and ownership opportunities.
- Meet the growing demand for senior housing as public housing senior high rises are demolished, including Auburn Towers and Garfield Heights.
- Insure that the new zoning for East Liberty supports human scale, mixed-use community.
- Eliminate the image of "housing projects" from the neighborhood. Promote responsible management guidelines for rental properties. Develop a mechanism to own and manage small to medium sized rental housing properties.
- Prioritize residential development along high-visibility arterials. Identify key sites on the arteries and strengthen linkages to surrounding neighborhoods.
- Improve public parks. Make East Liberty "greener." Connect the parks with the residential fabric. Re-establish the continuity of public streets and parks; build housing that faces the parks.



New residential units over storefronts line the new boulevard created from Penn Circle. The mix of uses will bring vitality to the street and connect the residential area to the commercial core.

## Economic Development Principles

The following economic development principles were also outlined by the Business Task Force:

- Attract and retain employers in the commercial core and adjacent industrial/commercial areas.
- Balance demands for commercial and residential development where uses are in competition.
- Site "big-box" retail so as to support ancillary job creation activities on nearby sites.
- Develop new businesses around the busway transit hub and link residents to existing jobs in the region.
- Create or expand financing vehicles to provide capital for business creation and expansion.
- Strengthen local market for goods and services through an increase in mixed-income housing.
- Encourage local hiring for new jobs created.



The entrance to East Liberty's business district is now "blocked" by a high-rise apartment building of the urban renewal era (photo to the left). New mixed-use development will create an inviting gateway to East Liberty's downtown at Penn Avenue and a beautiful boulevard out of Penn Circle West (drawing below).





## Human Development Principles

The Youth, Social Services and Public Safety Task Force was charged with exploring ways to support youth and families in the neighborhood, with attention to the broad issues of health, family relations, care for children, recreation, education, the elderly, and others with special needs. The Task Force also focused on issues related to crime against persons or property, with attention to developing effective means of crime prevention.

- Improve youth recreation and service opportunities.
- Provide job training to assist youth who want to work.



- Provide educational stipends to young people who are enrolled in training programs.
- Develop a community initiative in after-school programming.
- Encourage cross-generational initiatives (link seniors with young people).
- Advocate entertainment outlets that provide programs attractive to youth.
- Improve access to health care for youth.
- Educate people about the implications and impact of welfare reform.
- Establish more daycare centers. Improve access.
- Increase public safety efforts to reduce crime.

These revitalization principles serve as outlines for future planning and development. More detailed implementation plans in each subject area will be developed.



## IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES



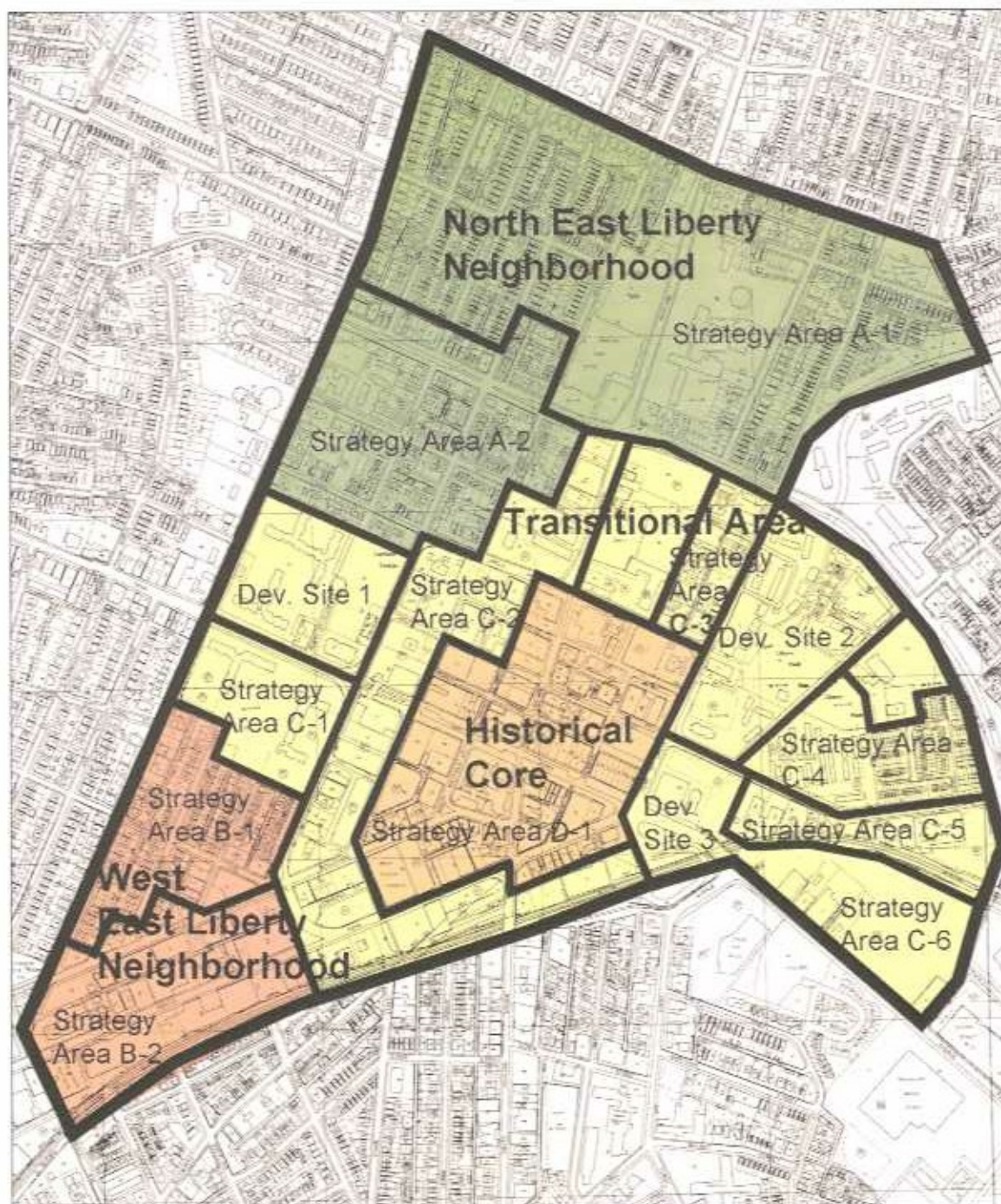
Although the goal is to create an integrated community, it is essential to develop separate revitalization strategies for different areas within East Liberty. The major areas discussed earlier are the historic core, the transition zone, and the residential neighborhoods. This subdivision is fairly apparent because of the physical destruction and new development that occurred during the 1960's urban renewal. Consequently, each district has specific issues or concerns to resolve so that the physical fabric of East Liberty can be successfully re-knit into a coherent whole. The strategies in the commercial core and the residential neighborhoods focus on conservation, while the transition zone needs to be rebuilt to bring the fragmented areas of East Liberty together.

The following are descriptions of two types of areas: development areas and strategy areas. Development areas contain sites where major intervention is needed as a catalyst for further change. Strategy areas call for a focus of resources over the next five years to reinforce and continue the change.

- **Development Areas**
- **Strategy Areas**



## Development and Strategy Areas





## Development Areas

Three sites in the transition zone have been identified as development areas. These are the primary catalytic sites that will create momentum toward the vision. These are not the only potential development sites. Other development sites will be added to the list as the opportunity arises. These specific sites provide the direct link between the vision of the "Town in a City" and the real estate projects on ELDI's agenda.

### Development Site 1: New Pennley Place



The Pennley Park Apartments, a 315-unit complex built in 1963 as part of the East Liberty Urban Renewal Program, had become a major problem property thirty years later.

Having passed through the hands of several investors, the property was poorly maintained and managed. In the early 1990's nearly half-vacant, it fell into receivership at HUD. HUD transferred Pennley Park Apartments to the Urban Renewal Authority upon completion of the foreclosure and sale disposition proceedings in August 1997. The URA also received a \$4 million grant to support the redevelopment of the rental units. Ground-breaking occurred in October, 1998. The development was renamed "New Pennley Place."

ELDI, in cooperation with The Community Builders, Inc. (TCB) is now rebuilding Pennley Park Apartments into a high quality, affordable, and desirable residential complex through demolition, substantial renovation, and new construction. Renamed "New Pennley Place," this \$28 million project will provide approximately 180 units of mixed-income housing in the seven acre site.

Construction began in October, 1998 and is anticipated to be completed in phases over a three to four year period.

As joint venture partners, ELDI and TCB are co-sponsors and co-developers for the project and are responsible for pre-development activities, financial packaging, renovation coordination and oversight, and marketing activities. New Pennley Place is designed to take a major step toward realizing East Liberty's vision by:

- Reducing density and high-density image.
- Developing a mix of market rate and low-moderate income subsidized rental units.
- Creating a sense of residential ownership of land and connection of buildings to land.
- Connecting the neighborhood to adjacent parks.
- Eliminating the image of "public" housing. Integrating the housing into its surroundings by restoring original through-streets and constructing new buildings that match historic development patterns.



Site plan of New Pennley.



## Development Site 2: Liberty Park Housing



This site, approximately fourteen acres in area, is another housing super-block created in the 1960's by demolishing the former urban fabric of the houses along the streets. The site now contains predominantly

suburban style townhouse buildings in poor physical condition that do not relate to the streets or the surrounding pattern of East Liberty. At the southern part of the development site sits, in very poor condition, one of the three housing high-rises built during the 1960's. All of the housing should be razed, an urban street pattern restored, and new housing created on the model of the traditional urban housing in East Liberty. These strategies are outlined below.

- Develop new low-rise owner-occupied housing of single family and duplex units.
- Design all new housing to be at least two stories in height with front entrances and porches facing the street.
- Build higher density housing of three stories to form a solid wall of buildings at the corner of Broad and Penn Circle with the potential of multi-family rental housing for elderly.
- Create a public edge to Liberty Park with new residential streets and new houses that look out across the park
- Seek public improvements for the park that enhance its use as an urban neighborhood park.
- Accommodate the automobile in the new housing development with both off-street and on-street parking. However, off-street parking must be provided behind or beside the houses so as not to detract from the quality of the neighborhood.

## Development Site 3: Mixed-Use Center



The site, the block across Penn Avenue from the Busway station, contains another of the large housing high-rises in East Liberty and occupies one of the most critical sites within the central area. The

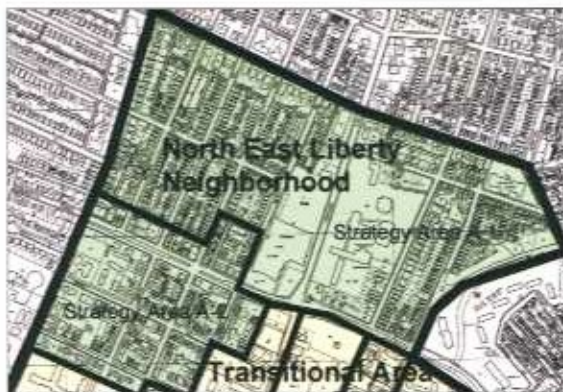
development site is important because it sits at the East Liberty busway stop and the intersection of major East End arterial streets, Centre Avenue, Penn Avenue and Shady Avenue. The adjacency of the development site to the busway station creates the opportunity to capitalize on the large volume of pedestrian traffic that passes through it on a daily basis. Although the high-rise is not vacant, the possibility of developing this critical site must be explored. The strategies for this site include:

- Explore development as major commercial "landmark" business center for such uses as hotel, entertainment, office and retail. Provide access to the neighborhood to the north and west. Possible market capture of the commuter population is a bonus.
- Locate parking and services so that they are not visible from Penn Avenue.
- Place new building entrances along Penn Avenue and Collins Avenue (now Penn Circle East) to tie the building into the adjacent historic retail core.

## Strategy Areas

Every successful small town has a blend of diverse residential and commercial districts each with recognizable physical characteristics. In a town, neighborhoods are comprised of small pedestrian-scaled blocks, knitted together by a network of streets, sidewalks, and public places. East Liberty, too, has such neighborhoods that are still mostly intact. They are in the northern and western parts of the community.

### East Liberty's North Neighborhood



The northern part of the neighborhood between East Liberty Boulevard and Stanton Avenue, is a relatively cohesive neighborhood that was essentially untouched by the physical changes made during the 1960's. East Liberty Boulevard, created at that time, isolated this part of the neighborhood by cutting off the north-south streets that originally linked it to the historic core.

A neighborhood of single family houses, town houses, and duplexes, it contains the largest educational institutions within East Liberty, Peabody High School, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, and Dilworth Grade School. Also included within the neighborhood is a mixture of some apartment buildings, local stores, and small neighborhood institutions.

The largest issue that exists within this neighborhood is the way it is subdivided and cut off from the rest of East Liberty.

The neighborhood has a good building stock, although some areas to the south along East Liberty Boulevard are in need of some repair and stabilization.

### General Strategies for the North Neighborhood

- Increase home ownership by marketing low interest loan programs.
- Encourage sensitive home repair with targeted home equity programs and/or low interest loan programs from local banks. Encourage use of Community Design Center "Renovation Information Network" program.
- Buy vacant units and market to owners who will occupy the houses. Sell at market rates with use of home ownership programs.
- Encourage neighborhood block watch, block parties, etc., to develop community spirit.

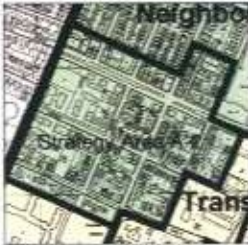
### Strategy Area: A-1



The area to the north of East Liberty is generally in good condition, although not architecturally distinctive. Individual deteriorated properties should be addressed, particularly those in very visible locations along major streets. More broadly, the community needs to deal with the longer-term issue of elderly homeowners who can no longer maintain their houses. While more home ownership must be encouraged for long-term stabilization, this area should need a limited amount of public capital. The exception to this strategy is a more involved effort to assist in the restoration of a group of townhouses along Mellon Street and selected houses along Negley Avenue as part of the Negley Corridor development strategy.



### Strategy Area: A-2



Also in relatively good condition, this area suffers more from its proximity to the transition zone. The property in the worst condition is along East Liberty Boulevard which

unfortunately gives the entire area a poor public image. Consequently, a key strategy for this area is to restore the problem property. The neighborhood will also be assisted by mixed-use street oriented development in the transition zone. The area should remain primarily residential, and the housing conservation program for strategy area A-1 should also be implemented here. Some public investment may be necessary, but the properties are not large.

### East Liberty's West Neighborhood



The western part of East Liberty, from Penn Circle to Negley Avenue, is a stable neighborhood that is a continuation of the areas to the west. The older housing between Baum Boulevard and Penn Avenue is similar to that of Friendship,

while the houses north of East Liberty Boulevard reflect the character of Highland Park. The weakest areas tend to occur where major cross-streets cut through the neighborhood, particularly Penn Avenue and East Liberty Boulevard. Both were widened by urban renewal into multi-lane arterial roads. New Pennley Place is addressing one of these major problem areas. Pennley Plaza across the street, while not physically deteriorated, continues to give the area the image of a public project.

The residential area has primarily large detached single family houses, many of which have been subdivided into rental units. The commercial area to the south has a combination of warehouse, wholesale businesses, and service retail. This area also has three residential buildings, the Kennilworth, the Negley Arms, and the Lofts.

### General Strategies for the West Neighborhood

- Increase home ownership by marketing URA programs and other sources of subsidies.
- Buy any vacant units and market for owner-occupied units at reduced price with renovation assistance.
- Use the Community Design Center's "Renovation Information Network" program. Hold workshops on renovating homes.
- Look at Habitat for Humanity and other home improvement programs to assist elderly or other owners to renovate homes.
- Contact absentee landlords and encourage renovations to existing rental units with some tax-deferred programs.
- Encourage neighborhood block watch, block parties, etc., to encourage community spirit.

### Strategy Area: B-1



This area of primarily detached housing could provide a direct link between the Friendship neighborhood to the west and the retail core of East Liberty. The major

strategies for this neighborhood are to increase home ownership, to encourage residential renovations that are sensitive to the historic character of the buildings, and to reconnect streets that provide a strong link from the residential streets into the commercial core.

With few vacant lots and a good building stock, public investment should be focused on conservation. Large-scale development, particularly that which would harm the existing residential neighborhood, should be discouraged. Business development efforts should help sustain the viability of neighborhood-serving businesses, such as those in the commercial buildings along Friendship Avenue.

### Strategy Area: B-2

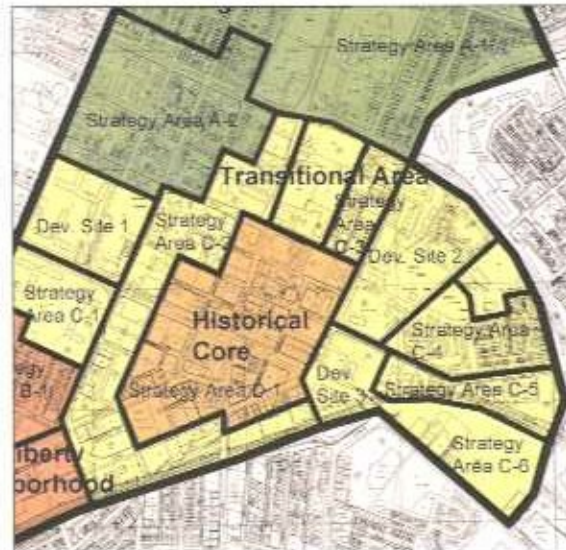


This area has historically been a service area because of its proximity to the railroad. Centre Avenue, however, is also the address for some of

the largest apartment buildings in the East End. The busway stop at Negley Avenue reinforces the viability of high density housing here. The area has the potential of developing into an unusual but attractive mix of service, retail, speciality retail, and warehouses with residential units. The high visibility of the buildings along Centre and Baum can be an advantage for these uses. The new Artists and Cities "Spinning Plate" development is a good example of a positive reuse of an existing older structure that adds vitality to the area.

The strategy here should be to support the uses that already fit this model, to market buildings to other potential businesses, and to discourage any destruction of buildings to create more surface parking lots. Vacant sites, particularly the triangular sites to the north of Baum Boulevard, need an active marketing effort to find a use and building type that can benefit from this location and add to its vitality and physical image. Uses which are completely dependent on large vehicular parking, such as fast food or other typical suburban strip businesses, should be discouraged, since these would destroy the character and potential revitalization of this area. Priority should be given to redeveloping such sites with denser urban buildings.

### Transition Zone



The transition zone which surrounds the historic business core of East Liberty is the area most impacted by the 1960's redevelopment. This area lacks any cohesive fabric and cuts the residential neighborhood from the historic core. The original streets do not continue through this area from the core to the neighborhood. The buildings do not relate to the streets, but are set back from the streets on large "superblocks." Large areas are covered with parking lots. This is the area of East Liberty that can best absorb new development because of the amount of vacant or underutilized land.

The important goals for this area are to restore a street pattern that will knit East Liberty together again, to create development that is in scale with its surroundings, and to reinforce and enhance the neighborhood parks that were created in this area. The area should mix both commercial and institutional activities with residential so that the historic commercial core gradually works into the neighborhoods. New development should be designed so that the outer edges of this area will blend unnoticeably into the existing neighborhoods. The physical barriers presented by Penn Circle and East Liberty Boulevard must be eliminated for this to occur.



## General Strategies for the Transition Zone

- Increase home ownership by buying vacant units, rehabilitating them and selling them to residents.
- Develop prototypes for infill housing, particularly at corner locations and market them to prospective buyers at attractive prices.
- Develop programs for low or no interest home improvement loans for owners of housing in target areas. Use the Community Design Center program. Hold workshops in renovating homes.
- Establish programs for public improvements at critical locations with CDBG funds or other grants.
- Look at Habitat for Humanity and other programs to assist elderly or other owners to renovate homes.
- Contact absentee landlords and encourage renovations to existing rental units with some tax-deferred programs.
- Encourage neighborhood block organizing, block parties, etc.

In addition to the three Development Areas described previously, the transition zone contains six strategy areas.

### Strategy Area: C-1

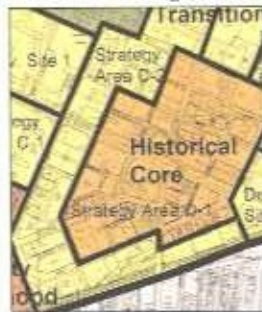
This area is currently occupied by the Penn Plaza apartments. It has the same "project" image as the former Pennley Park because both were built from the same plans. In order to eliminate the superblock, St. Clair Street



should be reconnected through the block, as well as a new street that could connect through the site from Negley to Penn Circle to the south of the existing buildings. New housing of 2-1/2 to 3 stories should be developed along Negley Avenue to tie into the historic fabric of Negley Avenue and continue the pattern set by New Pennley Place. Also to further integrate this area, the park-like area at the center of the site should be redesigned as a public park or square. It should be bordered by narrow residential streets and ideally fronted by new townhouses. Parking should be screened from major streets by either new buildings or both trees and shrubs.

### Strategy Area: C-2

This is the large area occupied by commercial and office buildings and surface parking lots that were built during and after the 1960's redevelopment. Additionally, this area contains the high-rise housing block that straddles Penn Avenue. Development here should create smaller urban blocks by reconnecting streets.



Penn Circle is a major issue in the development of this Strategy Area. Both the concept and the name of "Penn Circle" should be eliminated entirely. Instead, the four segments that were joined together to create the circle should, in concept, be rejoined to the streets they originally belonged to: Centre, Collins, Rural, and Euclid. Although it may not be possible to reconnect the original street grid, it is important to create as much continuity as possible. The "corners" of Penn Circle should be reconfigured as city street corners with stop signs or traffic lights, rather than as continuous curves that cut off other streets.

The Rural and Euclid segments of the circle, which carry little traffic, should be reduced to two-lane two-way streets. The additional right-of-way should be converted to on-street parking and street planting. These streets should be designed as the new “prestige addresses” in East Liberty. Beautiful street spaces that enhance the value of the property should be created to promote high-quality development.

Specific key sites, the parking lots along Centre Avenue, the housing high-rise sites, and the parking lots along Highland Avenue, should be the first priority for new development funds because of their potential catalytic impact. The possibility of exploring a pedestrian connection from Penn Circle to Ellsworth or Spahr should be explored with the city.

#### Strategy Area: C-3



This area, a remnant left from earlier neighborhood fabric, should benefit from development to the east by direct connections and spin-off development. Assistance from public programs could help improve existing buildings in this area, while new development is actively encouraged along Rural Street (now Penn Circle North) to help trigger redevelopment of the rest of this area. This area will be directly impacted by the development of Home Depot to the west.

Some of the housing stock to the north of the site near East Liberty Boulevard is in good shape, while properties on Sheridan are in need of major repair. A housing conditions analysis should be conducted in order to devise appropriate assistance and home improvement programs. Home Depot could be approached to provide supplies and volunteers to improve the homes.

Sites for new development should be investigated for a mix of office, retail and residential uses. Buildings that provide commercial space on the ground floor and residential units above could be appropriate.

#### Strategy Area: C-4



This residential superblock created following the 1960's urban renewal plan is subdivided into two types of housing: one portion is owner-occupied market-rate townhouses and the other portion is low-rise public housing. Both developments are isolated from the community because there are no streets through these developments. None of the housing on either site fronts the major streets of Broad and Larimer which border the block and connect it to the heart of East Liberty.

The strategy for this area should concentrate on providing new street connections through the developments, tying into Liberty Park and the streets planned as part of new developments on adjacent sites. With new residential units facing the street relating to the new development across Larimer, the vacant site at the corner of Broad and Larimer is a key property for development. In fact, this site could be acquired and become part of this development. The new streets proposed around Liberty Park would also assist in integrating these developments into the community. As a long-term strategy, any redevelopment of the public housing should concentrate on reorienting these units to the streets and the park. Further improvements should provide site amenities that not only physically enhance these existing buildings but help re-establish a clear difference between public and private space.



### Strategy Area: C-5



This primarily industrial service corridor is very small but presents sound opportunities for new development and potential employment.

The existing businesses to the west should be supported in any expansion. The post office operates a large facility that is well-situated for truck access and internal mail-handling. It is a poor location and poor facility for public use and especially inconvenient for pedestrians. Ideally a traditional neighborhood serving post office should be opened in the business district separate from the regional mail-handling facility. If not, any expansion or change by the post office should reorient the building to Broad Street or build a new public service post office building at the corner of East Liberty Boulevard and Broad Street. The narrow vacant site next to the post office is a good location for a new business, particularly a use that generates commercial activity, not just storage.

### Strategy Area: C-6



This sector lies across the East Busway from the rest of the commercial district of East Liberty. It was the site of the original railroad station.

Because it is cut off from the residential area by the busway, this site is typically reached by car. The primary occupant of this area is the shopping center which sits at the back of the site beyond a large parking lot which runs along Penn Avenue. This site presents the same problem as the Home Depot site where long expanses of parking disconnect buildings from the sidewalk. New smaller street-facing buildings should be constructed at the outer edges of the parking lot along Penn Avenue, so that the parking lot serves all the uses around it.

A key strategy should be to get the Port Authority and railroad to allow the construction of a pedestrian bridge across the busway to give proposed new residential developments access to this shopping area and the Giant Eagle shopping center across Penn Avenue. Other businesses should also be encouraged, particularly if they contribute to the retail mix or employment.

### East Liberty's Historic Core



The historic commercial core of East Liberty was not physically altered by the redevelopment of the 1960's; however, it was effectively walled off from the rest of East Liberty

by the construction of Penn Circle and was further isolated by the closure of Penn Avenue to vehicular traffic. (This street was reopened in the mid 1980's.) The existing building stock is a great asset, although many buildings are vacant or underutilized.

Foremost among the landmark buildings is the East Liberty Presbyterian Church, whose tall spire marks the center of East Liberty and can be seen from all the surrounding neighborhoods. It is the symbolic center of the neighborhood and an institution that has opened its doors to the community with cultural and social activities and an active community outreach program. Additionally, Motor Square Gardens, the Regent Theater, Eastminister Presbyterian Church, the Highland Building, and the Liberty Building signify the historic importance of this area. The major streets of Penn and Highland cross at the center of this area and have always constituted the main retail streets. Recently, the buildings along Centre Avenue to the south have become the site of a developing antique and arts district which continues into Shadyside across Highland and along Ellsworth.

### General Strategies for the Historic Core

- Expand and develop businesses in the historic retail core, market the area, buy and renovate critical storefront buildings.
- Provide free or low cost parking in parking areas for people using businesses. Maximize on-street parking.
- Target key vacant or underutilized buildings including Highland Building, Liberty Building, or former YMCA as special development projects or assist in purchase by potential developer.
- Encourage and expand specialty retail and region-serving businesses that exist in area.
- Implement strategic recommendations outlined in the 1999 East Liberty Retail Market Analysis. Look for “needs” of community not being served and actively market potential businesses to individuals or franchises (both local and regional).
- Develop one evening as “East Liberty” Night of Shopping.
- Provide tie into other East Liberty businesses with promotions, etc.
- Improve through-circulation with new (restored) street connections.
- Analyze parking demands. Assess demand for parking, especially looking at shared parking areas, e.g. church or theater with neighborhood commercial.
- Replace redundant and unnecessary parking areas with new businesses that mesh with others by providing missing services or expanding specialty areas. Key visible locations of parking areas should be first. Inventory and market vacant upper residential uses. Increase the overall occupancy of existing buildings.
- Develop support businesses for existing businesses and employees in area (banks, AAA, health care, etc.)

### Strategy Area: D-1



The major strategy for this area is to continue promoting the development of office, retail, institutional, eating and drinking establishments, entertainment, and

personal services. The possibility of establishing a regional specialty market should be explored as a regional draw for shoppers.

Development strategies should focus on attracting entrepreneurs and developers to key buildings within this area. Particular attention should be paid to the Highland and Liberty Buildings. Economic incentives and other tools to minimize risk and reduce the initial impact capital must be developed.

Smaller entrepreneurial businesses that would locate in storefronts could also be assisted by developing sound business plans, improving their marketing, and providing some leasing options for start-up businesses.







## COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT



The preceding pages identify the strengths and weaknesses of the East Liberty community as it exists today, and describe East Liberty's vision for its future. This section turns to the challenge of realizing the vision set out for East Liberty. It is essential to maintain the momentum that has been generated in the planning process. Broad community participation has been vital to the progress thus far and maintaining high levels of participation will be crucial going forward into the implementation stage.

- **East Liberty Community Council**
- **Next Steps**



## East Liberty Community Council

Urban renewal not only destroyed much of the physical fabric of the neighborhood, but depleted its social and economic base of long-time homeowners and businesses. In the years since then, East Liberty has been fractured among different geographic areas, interests, and populations. Because of the variety of uses that have developed there, it is a complex neighborhood with unusually challenging issues.

In order to rebuild East Liberty, its community has to be reconstructed. In order to connect neighborhood streets, people need to start re-connecting with each other. Communication needs to be opened and a common ground discovered. They must gain experience in working together in order to build trust in each other and confidence in outside funders and investors. Neighborhoods only succeed in revitalization when they are able to demonstrate broad-based neighborhood support and leadership that is capable of bringing diverse interests together behind a community vision.

East Liberty has a number of well-organized constituent groups, including block clubs, social service networks, associations of churches, recreation leagues, business organizations, and others. However, there are also many residents, property owners, employers, and other stakeholders who are not represented by such organizations. The sudden closing of the Nabisco plant demonstrated what can happen when a major business does not have a strong relationship to the community.

In order for East Liberty to move forward to realize its vision, the community needs to knit itself together to continue the planning process that produced the vision. East Liberty needs a grass-roots organization that is directly representative of all stakeholders in

the community and is directly accountable to the community for its work. The purpose of the organization would be to set the neighborhood's long-term goals and short-term agenda. It would be responsible for identifying issues that the community is concerned about and determining what kinds of changes are in keeping with the neighborhood's vision. Such a grass-roots group would offer membership to anyone in the neighborhood who is interested in joining — no expertise or credentials needed. Its membership, as large and diverse as possible, would elect its leadership to speak and act on behalf of the community as a whole.

This organization has a very different purpose from ELDI. The two organizations, in fact, would complement and reinforce each other. The strength of a grass-roots community organization is its representation of the neighborhood. The more people who join and participate, the more democratic it is. It is a means of encouraging people in the community to become more engaged in civic life. This same organization, however, would be unwieldy and ineffective at putting together real estate transactions or running social programs. A community development corporation, such as ELDI, on the other hand, is designed to carry out the neighborhood policies set by the community organization. Its purpose is to produce tangible change in the neighborhood. It is governed by a small board of people selected for their knowledge and skills. A large membership would make it difficult to fulfill its purpose. Because it is not directly representative of the neighborhood, a community development corporation needs to be accountable to the grass-roots organization. Thus a broad-based community organization would give ELDI's actions a framework that has formal community support and validates the legitimacy of ELDI's work on behalf of the neighborhood.

To guide and propel the revitalization of East Liberty, a volunteer community council is proposed. Its purpose would be to provide ongoing community leadership and oversee implementation. The council would organize and carry out the planning process in the neighborhood, create a forum for community deliberation and action, and insure that implementation of the plan is in keeping with the vision. The East Liberty Community Council could be modeled on successful organizations in other neighborhoods, such as the South Side Planning Forum. The remainder of this section describes the role of the Council, its relationship to ELDI, its staffing requirements, and financing vehicles necessary to facilitate plan implementation.

The Community Council should be broadly representative of the East Liberty community, consisting of residents, community leaders, business leaders, and organizations with a stake in the neighborhood's future. Because of its broad "grassroots" representation, the council will speak for the neighborhood as a whole and will be responsible for the ongoing organization of East Liberty's diverse interests into a cohesive and effective working group.

The Council will perform several essential functions:

- Communicating and developing the vision laid out in the plan.
- Facilitating community deliberation and decision-making.
- Advocating for the community.
- Interpreting the plan to guide developers and agencies active in the area.
- Articulating community positions on key issues.
- Setting priorities among development activities.
- Updating the plan in an ongoing community-based planning process over time.

The Council's role is to create a neighborhood agenda and develop leadership through community organizing. ELDI's responsibilities will focus on real estate development. To extend the analogy to the South Side, if the Community Council is similar to the South Side Planning Forum, ELDI will serve the same role as the South Side Local Development Corporation. ELDI will initiate key development projects either on its own or in conjunction with other partners. Implementation of non-real estate activities identified in strategy plans will be the responsibility of other revitalization partners including social agencies, religious institutions, cultural and recreational organizations. The Council's role will be to guide and support these efforts, and to provide a forum for public deliberation of issues that arise.



### **ELDI's Role**

ELDI will be the community developer, and in that role will assume responsibility for the "bricks and mortar" activities in East Liberty. ELDI can then focus on development and on insuring that development projects accomplish the goals set forth in the community plan. Through participation in the Community Council, ELDI can play an active role in shaping neighborhood policy and will be a key player in turning those policies into concrete reality. As larger community issues come to the forefront, ELDI can join its development expertise with other organizations specializing in social and economic improvements.

In order to begin the implementation phase, a plan for development financing must be created by ELDI. Significant amounts of grant support, public financing and conventional development financing will be required in order to implement the community plan.

Two types of support should be pursued as ELDI initiates projects.

- Predevelopment funds to support strategic acquisitions and feasibility analysis.
- Construction and permanent financing for specific developments.

While both types of funds are critical to the overall success of the revitalization effort, it may fall to individual partners to arrange portions of the financing based on the demands of lenders and investors.

### **Establishing the Council**

It is suggested that participants in the planning process to date come together to discuss the idea of a Community Council. Basic assumptions about the Council include that it be representative, self-governing and mission-driven. If the general concept gains support among planning participants, ELDI would then convene a founder's congress to plan the specifics of the Council, select its members and draft a mission statement and by-laws.

The newly established Council would then present the founding documents in a community meeting for ratification. Initial operating support must be secured from private and/or public funding sources.

## Next Steps

### Council Staffing

As a grass-roots organization, the East Liberty Community Council will depend on active volunteer efforts, especially in its first year. Once the organization establishes itself, a plan for professional staffing should be developed. For example, a small professional staff of three could perform the following functions:

- **Member Support:** Providing logistical and technical support to the Council enabling it to meet regularly, consider development proposals, review progress in implementing the plan and take further action toward community goals.
- **Community Outreach:** Conducting ongoing work to bring more stakeholders into the process, to promote the goals of the plan within the community and to engage residents and others in active participation in renewal efforts.
- **Neighborhood Planning:** Developing, within the framework of the community vision, an annual neighborhood agenda and detailed strategies, refining plans over time and addressing new issues that arise.

The production of this Community Plan marks a major event in the planning process for East Liberty's revitalization. East Liberty's community vision sets the stage for change.

ELDI must take the next steps, which are:

- Gathering the planning process participants.
- Producing focused strategies for housing and business development.
- Engaging neighborhood stakeholders in developing the Community Council.
- Convening a founder's congress to organize and initiate the Council.

### Ongoing Process

The concept for *A Plan for East Liberty*, of which "A Vision for East Liberty" is the first document, anticipates continued development and updates in a series of volumes. This will provide an ongoing record of both the content and the working process of the community plan. This format is based on an ongoing process that encourages continuing involvement by the citizens of East Liberty as well as organizations and agencies. The process will also be responsive to emerging possibilities and is open to new developments. Each document will recognize accomplishments and build a foundation for future improvements.











