

# BLOCK BY BLOCK

## *Parks, Homes, and Commerce*

Lawrence is a city of approximately 72,000 people located 25 miles north of Boston. Europeans first settled the area in 1640. The City was incorporated in 1853. The City sits on the banks of the Merrimack River, and became a major textile manufacturing center in the late 1800s as industrialist began to harness the power of the river to operate the mills. The mill jobs attracted immigrant workers, first from Ireland and later from Italy, Portugal and other European countries.



Starting in the late 1960s, cheap housing began attracting a new wave of immigrants from the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, and later from Southeast Asia. Many of the new residents did not speak English and did not have a high school education, limiting their employment opportunities. Competition from foreign manufacturers led to substantial layoffs and mill closures, with the City losing well over half its manufacturing base by the 1990s. By the end of the 20th century, Lawrence suffered from unemployment rates more than double the state

average, household incomes less than half the state average, and substantial disinvestment in the existing infrastructure and buildings. Lawrence emerged from this era as not only one of the poorest cities in the Commonwealth but also in the nation.

Over 12 million square feet of mill space along the Merrimack in the northern part of the City sat vacant or severely underutilized as warehouse space. The area was rife with contaminated sites, the result of years of manufacturing activity. The North Common was one of the densest and poorest neighborhoods in the City, with more than 30% of the population living in poverty. The City focused redevelopment efforts on the mill district and North Common neighborhood, including purchasing and demolishing vacant, abandoned buildings. However, municipal efforts met with little success in attracting new development.



Through the combined, cooperative efforts of residents, non-profits, developers, the City, and

state and federal governments, Lawrence is transforming the neighborhood and abutting mill district into a vibrant, multi-use area within walking distance of a new multi-modal transit center and downtown.



The district features a mix of housing options and a wide range of employment opportunities, as well as restaurants, shops, and art venues. Well over \$100 million of private and public funds have been invested in this area over the past decade. Investment is expected to continue despite a downturn in the real estate market, with a new federal immigration processing center under construction, the purchase of a large mill building by Forest City Development and several other projects.<sup>1</sup>

## Jumpstarting Investment and Redevelopment

Initial private investment in the 1980s followed by public sector initiatives beginning in the mid-1990s brought a new focus on redevelopment in the mill district and North Common neighborhood, providing the catalyst needed to bring new life to the area. Private sector efforts

<sup>1</sup> See the Haverhill case study for a discussion of a Forest City mill re-use project underway in that city.

were led by Chet Sidell, a local apparel manufacturer, who in 1985 purchased an old mill building on Essex Street, refurbished it, and moved his business to the site. In 1993, Sidell purchased the KGR Mill on Island Street across from his Essex Street building, and moved his expanding business there. Sidell was the first mill owner to recognize that the old mill buildings offered opportunities for redevelopment, and his initial investment would prove to be a major catalyst for the redevelopment of the area.



Soon after, a coalition of federal, state, and local agencies and organizations, private businesses and community groups came together in the Lawrence Gateway Project, a coordinated effort aimed at community renewal, environmental cleanup and economic development. The main focus of the Gateway Project was to improve transportation access and infrastructure, and provide environmental remediation at major contaminated sites in the area. One major component of the project was a \$30 million dollar Massachusetts Highway Department (MHD) transportation and infrastructure project that included access improvements from Interstate 495 to the mill district and downtown Lawrence.

The US Environmental Protection Agency invested \$1 million in Brownfield funding to help

address some of the contamination. A portion of this money was used to assess contamination of the Oxford Paper site, which the City and local contractors later cleaned up. As part of the Gateway Project, GenCorp, a Fortune 500 company that had manufactured plastics within the district voluntarily invested an estimated \$100 million to remediate environmental contamination on its own 8.6 acre site.



In planning for and developing the Gateway Project, MHD and its partners held discussions with the mill owners in the area, but failed to talk with small business owners and residents of the neighborhood. As MHD worked to gain acceptance of ongoing efforts, the agency approached Lawrence Community Works (LCW), a local non-profit working to revitalize the North Common area through providing affordable housing. MHD asked the group to “bring them the neighborhood.” LCW said that they would not try to persuade the neighborhood to blindly jump on board, but would work to educate the public about the project. In an effort to galvanize the community and provide them with a voice in planning for redevelopment, LCW launched the Reviviendo Gateway Initiative.

Working with a 38-member citizens’ group called the Reviviendo Planning Group, LCW gathered together residents, business owners, including Chet Sidell, politicians, and city staff in an effort to better understand the development issues facing the neighborhood. The Reviviendo Gateway Initiative provided a forum, bringing together people who did not usually speak to each other. This citizen-led initiative energized the community and evolved into a major public process resulting in the development of a comprehensive vision and plan for the area. The plan focused on creating affordable housing and open space on vacant lots, mill revitalization, and job creation at home-grown businesses. In November 2002, over 350 people came out to launch the strategy, which is now being implemented by a diverse group of public, private, non-profit and citizen-led groups.

The Gateway Project, Sidell’s investments, and the Reviviendo Gateway Initiative have led to a wide range of investments in the area, with new projects continuing to enter the pipeline. The following four projects happened over a period of approximately seven years creating a nucleus of activity ultimately leading to additional investment in this once decaying area.

### **60 Island Street: The Private Sector Steps Up**

The vision, commitment, and financial contribution of key private sector individuals have been central to the redevelopment of the Mill district and North Common area. Bell Tower Development, a real estate development firm started by Chet Sidell and his son, Gary, led the private sector investment wave in the area. Chet Sidell is an energetic, enthusiastic man whose passion for Lawrence and its manufacturing legacy is evident when he talks about his

redevelopment of 60 Island Street in the heart of Lawrence's mill district.



Sidell owned and operated a women's apparel manufacturing company in Lawrence. In 1985, as his business expanded, Sidell bought an old factory at 181 Canal Street, renovated the building, and moved production to this facility.

During the height of his business, Sidell created a family charitable trust. He deposited profits from the company in the trust and used it to fund charitable activities in Lawrence, including in the Mill District. Around 1988, then-Governor William Weld proposed closing the Heritage State Park<sup>2</sup>, a museum headquartered in a 1840s row house, the last remaining boarding house that was used by mill workers. The boarding house was located at the corner of Canal Street and Jackson Street in close proximity to Sidell's factory. To save the park, Sidell worked with the business community to raise money to keep the park open, making a large contribution from his own family's charitable trust.

Successful efforts to save Heritage Park and investment in the mill building at 181 Canal

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<sup>2</sup> The Lawrence Heritage State Park was one of several around the state that Weld proposed closing, some of which were ultimately shut down. For more information about the Lawrence park, go to <http://www.mass.gov/dcr/parks/northeast/lwhp.htm>

Street represent the beginning of a long history of commitment in Lawrence's Mill District. In 1993, Sidell bought the 150,000 square foot Kunhardt Mill building at 60 Island Street, located on the corner of Canal and Island Streets across from his factory, renovated it, and moved his apparel business there.

In 2001, Sidell closed his apparel firm, and turned his attention to revitalizing the Mill District through the redevelopment of old mill buildings into mixed use space. With his son Gary, he established the firm of Bell Tower Development.<sup>3</sup> Their first project was to convert the building at 60 Island Street into commercial space. They wanted to create a unique business complex that would showcase the architectural history of the City's industrial past. They understood that a redevelopment project of the kind they envisioned could not be done if the motivation for the project was solely to maximize profits. Instead, they looked at the project as a showpiece for what could be done to reinvent the Mill District into space that would meet 21<sup>st</sup> century business needs while preserving the historic character of the area.

The Sidells funded the redevelopment of 60 Island Street exclusively with private money. They initially sought and received federal Historic Tax Credits for the project, but the Internal Revenue Service decided that the project was not eligible for tax credits because they were renting the space to Chet's apparel business. The Sidells unsuccessfully fought this ruling and returned the tax credit money.

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<sup>3</sup>For more information, see <http://www.belltowerdevelopment.com>



The Sidells worked meticulously to preserve the architectural features that spoke to its industrial past of the mill building. They refurbished the building's brick façade and retained or replaced windows with period replicas. The interior of the building features the high ceilings and exposed beams and piping from the industrial era. Freight elevators are still in use in parts of the building. Exposed brick comprise the interior walls. The Sidells brought in original wood floor boards from a nearby mill building that was beyond salvage, and refurbished them for use, providing a sense of richness to the common spaces in the building.



In recognition of his attention to accurately preserving the architectural integrity of the building, the project was awarded the Charles W. Elliott Award by Preservation Massachusetts.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Preservation Massachusetts is a state-wide non-profit organization dedicated to preserving the architectural and

The financial feasibility of the project benefited from the fact that no contaminants were found on the site.

The Sidells included public spaces for use by tenants and others within their design. A comfortable sitting room with a brick fireplace is available to tenants for meetings with clients. A large function room on the first floor is used for weddings, community plays, and other activities which bring the public into the building. The developers refurbished and landscaped the courtyard for use by tenants for barbeques, picnics, and music.



Cambridge College, one of the largest tenants in the building, also uses the courtyard for graduation ceremonies. In this location the College increased enrollment more than three times expectations.

The Sidells wanted to create “mini-incubator” space at 60 Island Street, where small, growing businesses could network and do business together. They focused on already established local private and non-profit businesses that would bring in foot traffic for meetings and events. They also offered to build out and lease spaces as

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cultural heritage of Massachusetts. The Charles W. Elliot Award honors exceptional vision and excellence in planning. For more about Preservation Massachusetts, visit <http://www.preservationmassachusetts.org/>.

small as 250 square feet to attract one- and two-person businesses that had potential to grow. They concentrated on making the space safe, clean, and well-maintained so potential and existing tenants would view Lawrence as a good “home” for their business.

They marketed the building as “unique space at a fair price” and convinced prospective tenants that the facility could deliver everything that would be available at a location in Woburn or Boston, but in an environment that supported small and growing firms. Early tenants included the Merrimack Valley Economic Development Council, Lawrence Community Works, GroundWork Lawrence, a lumber company, and a storage company. In 2008, the building housed 80 tenants, ranging from non-profits to government agencies to private sector firms. They included printers, graphic designers, job training providers, yoga studios, a theater company, computer sales and consultants, Habitat for Humanity, and Cambridge College.

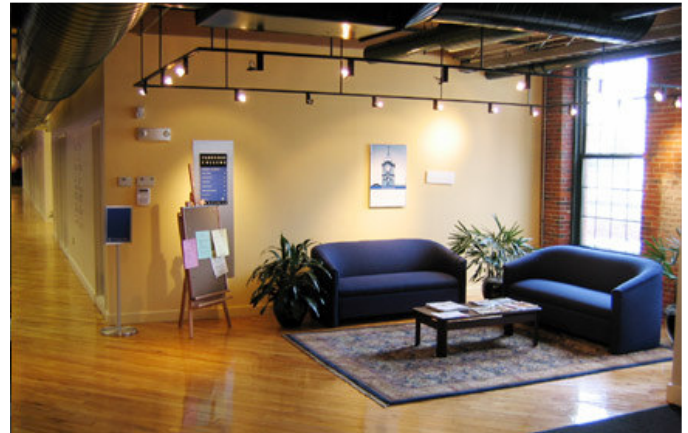
The Sidells remain involved, interviewing prospective tenants to get a feel for how well they will fit in and contribute to the collegial atmosphere they have created. They successfully attract businesses that have formed relationships with each other, and that take pride in their space. Turnover is low, with only a handful of firms leaving over the first seven years.<sup>5</sup>

60 Island Street is within a five minute walk of the new Lawrence Transit Center which provides commuter rail, bus and parking. Although the investment was not motivated by its proximity to this multi-modal facility, Chet Sidell notes that an

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<sup>5</sup> Lawrence Community Works moved out when its space adjacent to Our House for Design and Technology was completed. Another tenant, Powerhouse Enterprises (<http://www.powerhouse-enterprises.com/>), a manufacturer of “green” affordable housing, moved its offices into one of its model homes.

increasing number of his tenants are taking advantage of transit for commuting and business trips. The project also has available approximately 450 parking spaces (both owned and leased) on three nearby lots, and benefits from access to the new highway interchange undertaken as part of the Gateway Project.



Since completion of 60 Island Street, the Sidells have purchased and renovated the adjoining property at 54 Island Street. They purchased this property in response to an inquiry from the Essex Art Center, which was looking for affordable space in Lawrence. After working with the Essex Art Center to identify space needs and what would be a realistic rent, Bell Tower Development purchased and redeveloped 54 Island Street for arts-related uses, leasing a large portion of the space to the Essex Art Center. Other tenants have included a fencing studio and a metal smith.<sup>6</sup>

The Sidells’ interests in celebrating Lawrence’s cultural history do not end with its architecture. They have been instrumental in promoting community supported agriculture (CSA) in Lawrence, including encouraging their tenants to participate in a local CSA. They also let the CSA use 60 Island Street as a distribution site.

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<sup>6</sup> For more information on the Art Center, see <http://www.essexartcenter.com/aboutus.html>

Chet Sidell participated tirelessly with the Gateway project, particularly in efforts to get the City Council to change the industrial zoning in the Mill District to allow mixed uses, including housing. The zoning overlay district was adopted and paved the way for several additional redevelopment projects in the Mill District.

60 Island Street is one of the first major commercial redevelopment projects in Lawrence's Mill District. It has been a catalyst for attracting additional investment dollars and has contributed significantly to enlivening the area with an array of daytime activities. The Sidells' commitment and success demonstrate how the vision and determination of one private development company and its willingness to take a leadership role can transform a neighborhood into a growing, vibrant mixed use area, making smart growth a reality in older urban neighborhoods.

### **Lawrence Community Works: Redefining the Role of a Community Development Corporation**

In addition to the private sector efforts of the Sidells, non-profit organizations have provided leadership in the redevelopment of the Mill District and North Common neighborhood. One of these organizations is Lawrence Community Works (LCW), a community development corporation (CDC)<sup>7</sup> serving the City of Lawrence in creating affordable housing.

The earliest incarnation of a CDC in Lawrence arose out of the struggle over urban renewal

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<sup>7</sup> A community development corporation is a non-profit entity established to serve a lower income neighborhood or city. CDCs typically focus on economic development and job creation, education, and real estate development (most often affordable housing) in the neighborhoods they serve.

during the 1980s. As the City worked to revitalize neighborhoods, often through demolition, a group of residents and community activists emerged to fight for affordable housing in the North Common neighborhood. The group formed the Immigrant City Community Housing Corporation, and was successful in developing the Heritage Common, a limited equity cooperative development of 140 housing units on Jackson Street. In 1986, the Immigrant City Community Housing Corporation spun off a community development corporation called the Heritage Common CDC, which subsequently was renamed the Lawrence Planning and Development Corporation. This entity developed two properties totaling 43 units in North Lawrence before becoming largely dormant in the mid-1990s.

In 1999, Bill Traynor, a Lawrence native experienced in community organizing, accompanied by three Massachusetts Institute of Technology graduate students, joined the CDC as the new management team. The group renamed the organization Lawrence Community Works, and hired an experienced community organizer to assist them in their work.<sup>8</sup> The goal of the new team was to revive the Lawrence CDC, with particular focus on community involvement, identifying leaders, and creating a structure for their efforts. Through time, LCW realized that they needed to focus more effort on engaging all members of the community, not just the obvious leaders. They adopted a network building approach to develop an open process and engage both residents and business owners. Traynor's team approach to community organizing involved knocking on doors and meeting in homes to build relationships with residents and understand their priorities. As a result, the group became involved

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<sup>8</sup>For more information, see <http://www.lcworks.org/>

in summer and after-school programming and creation of a neighborhood park, before they built a single house.



Traynor encouraged citizens to participate at many different levels, depending on their needs, interests, availability and comfort. Some participants became involved in supporting campaigns for zoning changes or political candidates, while others were inspired to run for office or participate in government through serving on boards and commissions. At a minimum, a resident's involvement provided another set of eyes on the street to look out for community interests. The CDC also looked for projects that would resonate with a large audience, helping to build the social network of the organization.

LCW's aim to both engage residents and build the civic infrastructure necessary to rebuild the community resulted in the creation of a network of engaged citizens at all levels, and the fostering of a social contract between participants in which each would look out for the interests of the others.<sup>9</sup> LCW's efforts in the North Common

neighborhood have focused on creating affordable housing (both rental and home ownership units) and building the capacity of residents through education and job training.

## **Union and Mechanic Homes and Garden: A Unique Collaboration**

In 2002, LCW organized and led the Community Works Neighborhood Summit, a gathering of residents and businesses located in the North Common neighborhood. The Summit's goals were to create a vision for the area and identify projects for community redevelopment. The Summit included a street-by-street review of issues and opportunities. Participants recognized both affordable housing and community open space as critical needs and proposed creating some affordable housing units and a community garden on four vacant house lots at the corner of Union and Mechanic Streets. The Union and Mechanic site is located on a once densely populated City block. Several homes were razed during the 1990s, and the properties abandoned and taken by the City. An alleyway ran behind the remaining homes and the empty lots. People used the vacant lots and alleyway for gardens, parking cars, and illegal dumping. Based on the recommendations from the Community Summit, a partnership between Lawrence Community Works, Groundwork Lawrence, the City, and residents formed to build affordable housing on the Union and Mechanic lots, with community gardens in the adjacent alleyways.

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<sup>9</sup> Plastrik, Peter and Madeleine Taylor, *Lawrence Community Works: Using the Power of Networks to Restore a City*, prepared for the Barr Foundation, March 2004.

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[http://www.barrfoundation.org/usr\\_doc/Lawrence\\_Community\\_Works\\_case\\_study.pdf](http://www.barrfoundation.org/usr_doc/Lawrence_Community_Works_case_study.pdf)





Groundwork Lawrence (GWL) is a locally-based non-profit “working to create sustainable environmental change through community-based partnerships.”<sup>10</sup> The organization is affiliated with Groundwork USA, an international organization which operates on the premise that “environmental conditions are inextricably linked to the economic and social health of a neighborhood.”<sup>11</sup> Groundwork Lawrence grew out of a 1997 interagency agreement between the US Department of the Interior, the National Park Service, and the US Environmental Protection Agency. The agreement supported the establishment of Groundwork “trusts” in brownfield communities across the US. Over the next three years a steering committee, assembled by the City of Lawrence, created a three-year business plan and decided to incubate the trust as a program of the Merrimack River Watershed Council. In 2001 GWL was launched as an independent, incorporated non-profit organization.



LCW spearheaded the effort to create affordable housing on the vacant lots, while GWL oversaw the efforts to transform the alleyway into a community garden. The group worked with T. Luke Young, a trained architect in the Real Estate Department of LCW, to design the project.

Ownership of the alleyway was murky. Much of the property along Union and Mechanic had been owned by the Essex Company many years ago. When the company sold the land for housing development, the deeds did not include any reference to the alleyway. Fearing contamination, the City did not assume ownership of the alleyway when it took ownership of the abandoned lots. To move forward, LCW needed to acquire ownership of the lots and GWL of the alleyway. LCW approached Enel North America, a large hydro-electric company that had inherited the Essex Company’s land holdings and informed them that Enel still owned the land. LCW asked the company to give them a quit claim deed to the alleyway, which Enel agreed to do. Because LCW did not intend to build housing on the alleyway, it approached GWL about taking it as open space.

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<sup>10</sup> [www.groundworklawrence.org](http://www.groundworklawrence.org)

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.groundworkusa.net/>

GWL established itself as a land trust, and subsequently accepted ownership of the alleyway.

The total development cost would eventually reach \$1.6 million. Funding sources for predevelopment, construction and permanent financing for the housing included TD BankNorth, the City of Lawrence, the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development, the Life Initiative, Federal Home Loan Bank, CharlesBank Homes, Armand Hyatt (counsel to LCW), the Massachusetts Housing Partnership, and T. Luke Young (project architect).



Significant staff time for the design and construction of the community gardens was contributed by GWL. It was known that the alleyway included contaminated soils. To address this issue, GWL built two 120 feet by nine feet raised stone beds and brought in clean soil. These beds were funded through a Massachusetts Coastal Zone Management (CZM) \$12,000 grant.

The design of the open space incorporated stormwater Best Management Practices to minimize the impact of the development on river and coastal water quality. These included a patio constructed with permeable pavement and three terraced rain gardens to reduce erosion. Rain

barrels were included on the homes to collect rain water. The CZM grant also paid for the development of an integrated management plan to comprehensively address drainage and maintenance issues for the site. GWL continues to manage the community garden, maintaining a waiting list for residents interested in securing a garden plot. The gardeners come from throughout the neighborhood and GWL works with them to instill pride in the alleyway and participate in upkeep.



Through its efforts to incorporate Low Impact Development (LID) techniques, GWL discovered that provisions in the City's existing stormwater regulations were not LID-friendly and make the inclusion of LID techniques cost prohibitive for affordable housing projects. As a result GWL began working with the City to adopt regulations that encourage rather than discourage LID techniques. With regard to the houses, LCW had to aggressively lobby the Massachusetts Housing Partnership to finance the LID design (landscaping, down spouts and rain barrels), as these were considered "frills" not covered with the affordable housing money.

This collaborative resulted in the construction of four condominium units and one single family home. The units were completed in 2006 and sold to first-time homeowners through a lottery.



The deeds require that the units remain affordable for thirty years. The houses were constructed to be energy efficient, including Energy-Star appliances and windows, and environmentally friendly, durable materials that would help reduce the cost of utilities and maintenance for the home owners.

**Dr. Nina Scarito Park**

Dr. Nina Scarito Park (formerly Brook Street Park) is a 2.7 acre recreation area adjacent to the Spicket River in the North Common neighborhood. The park is named for a Lawrence obstetrician who delivered more than 20,000 babies during her many years of practice.

The land formerly housed a small factory in the late 1880s. In 1949, a commercial laundry opened on the site and operated there until the 1980s. At that time, the building was razed, leaving just the foundation and soils contaminated from years of industrial use. In 1986, DBT Corporation (a bank holding company) acquired the site through foreclosure. The parcel sat vacant for more than fifteen years, and was used for illegal dumping and drug activity. Because of significant turnover in the neighborhood, few residents had any memory of its prior uses and most were unaware

of its contamination. Although fenced, the fence had been peeled back, and neighborhood children played on the contaminated soil.



As part of LCW’s 2001 North Common Community Summit, residents identified the redevelopment of the old laundry site as key to the revitalization of the neighborhood. Because of its location along the river amidst a relatively high density residential neighborhood with few open spaces, participants identified an urban park as the best use for the site.

Based on the outcome of the community planning process, GWL, , took on the challenge of the park redevelopment, acting as the project manager. GWL knew that the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection had identified the parcel as contaminated, and that using it as a park would require substantial site cleanup. In support of the project, the United States Environmental Protection Agency, through its Brownfields Supplemental Assistance Program<sup>12</sup>, awarded GWL a \$50,000 grant to help organize community support for this important project.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> For more information, see <http://www.epa.gov/brownfields>  
<sup>13</sup> For more information, see <http://www.archive.org/details/MassDEP-Brownfield-Success-Lawrence-2006>

The transformation of Scarito Park took six years. During this period, GWL coordinated community outreach and volunteer activity, oversaw environmental assessment and cleanup, managed site planning and design, helped with legal and real estate work, conducted fundraising, negotiated permitting, and oversaw construction. The project required four years just for fundraising, negotiations, legal work and environmental cleanup. On-the-ground project work took two years.



In 2001 and 2002, LCW and GWL held a series of community design meetings. Using the design concepts created to frame the project, GWL hired Boston-based Copley Wolff Design Group<sup>14</sup> to prepare a detailed design for the park as well as construction cost estimates. The firm conducted a series of meetings with the neighborhood in a variety of venues, including people's living rooms, to gather more ideas and promote the project.

GWL and the City then began negotiating with DBT Corporation, the financial institution that had assumed ownership of the property through foreclosure, for the purchase of the site. The negotiations were complicated by the fact that the property owners owed the City \$1.8 million in back taxes. In 2003, the City of Lawrence stepped forward with a proposal that would allow DBT to

pay \$835,000 of the total amount owed, forgiving the remainder of the debt. One rationale for the reduction in taxes was that the site had been accumulating the tax burden based on a commercial/industrial use classification, but in actual fact it had been abandoned and unusable for some time. The City needed the change in ownership to move forward with environmental remediation. Recouping a partial payment of the back taxes provided a substantial influx of money into the general fund.

At about this time, DBT was acquired by Fleet Bank. GWL and residents met with the bank and rolled out plans for the park. After several meetings, Fleet committed to the project, agreeing to donate the land to City and committing \$200,000 in an escrow account to help with construction.

While planning for the land transfer was underway, Bank of America acquired the property as part of a merger, requiring additional site testing of soil and groundwater contamination. As a result, Bank of America spent \$3 million to thoroughly clean up the site. The cleanup included the removal of 75% of the soil, including almost 1,400 cubic yards of cadmium- and lead-contaminated soil and 850 cubic yards of petroleum- and hydrocarbon-contaminated soil, as well as two concrete tanks from the Spicket River, and the remaining foundation from the buildings that had been on the site. The remaining soil was sealed with a concrete cap and new soil brought in to replace what was removed. A deed restriction states the property can only be used for parkland, and prevents any future drilling of soils on the site.

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.copley-wolff.com/>



The City then applied for and was granted a \$325,000 Urban Self Help grant. One provision of the grant award was that the City rezone the parcel from industrial use to open space, and in 2005, the City Council voted to approve the zoning change. Additional funding for the park construction included \$25,000 from the City and \$200,000 put in escrow by the bank. The City of Lawrence Community Development Department also provided some funding from its Community Development Block Grant funds.<sup>17</sup>

Despite concerted efforts to remove contaminants, the bank was concerned that it would be liable for damages should users of the park get sick. To complete the deal, the City engaged the Massachusetts Attorney General's Office to negotiate a "Covenant Not to Sue". This agreement, allowable under the State's 21E regulations, the first of its kind in Lawrence, persuaded the bank to donate the land to the City.<sup>15</sup>



The City Council's willingness to accept the land was the result of ongoing, concurrent efforts of GWL and other proponents to convince the City that, although using the site for a park would not generate tax revenues, it would be a worthwhile use of the land. GWL argued that the project would reduce crime, improve public health, and increase the value of surrounding land. The City estimated that the project would result in up to \$300,000 annually in additional tax revenue from surrounding properties within 10 years.

The National Park Service (NPS) provided funding for the production of a brochure through its Rivers and Trails program. The NPS produced this brochure because Scarito Park is part of the Spicket River Greenway, a planned system of trails and parks along a 2.5 mile section of the river.<sup>18</sup> Scarito Park is the first park in the Spicket River Greenway, which is the only natural feature in North Lawrence. With its success, the City is now energized to assume leadership at other sites along the river.

To help finance the park, the City wanted to secure Urban Self Help money from the State, but did not have an approved Open Space and Recreation Plan<sup>16</sup>. GWL offered to write the plan, and the City agreed to pay \$15,000 from a City bond for parks improvements to pay for it.

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.mass.gov/legis/laws/mgl/gl-21e-toc.htm>

<sup>16</sup> For more information, see <http://www.mass.gov/envir/dcs/openspace/default.htm>

<sup>17</sup> For more information, see <http://www.hud.gov>

<sup>18</sup> For more about the Spicket River Greenway, go to <http://www.groundworklawrence.org/files/library/spicket-river-greenway.pdf>.

In designing Scarito Park, GWL worked with a landscape architect to incorporate more trees and ensure that it included LID techniques such as permeable pavement in the parking lot. GWL then hired New England Infrastructure, Inc. to construct the park. GWL and the City completed Scarito Park in 2007, at a cost of well over \$3 million, including the site cleanup costs.

From the time that participants in the Reviviendo Gateway Initiative first identified the Brook Street parcel as a site for a neighborhood park, many people, organizations, businesses and government agencies worked to make it a reality. Community volunteers donated over 500 hours in planning, design, and advocacy. The participation by and dedication of GWL, LCW, the City, and many state and federal agencies was critical.



This project was complicated by several factors, including the ever-changing ownership of the parcel due to foreclosure and mergers, the level of site contamination, municipal budget constraints, and the location within a poor, underrepresented area of the City. Without the Covenant Not to Sue, the bank would not have transferred the property to the City. The willingness of GWL to prepare the City's Open Space and Recreation plan provided access to critical state funding that coincided with the State's overall focus on smart growth. GWL could have given in to the many

challenges that arose, instead the organization diligently worked to resolve each one.

### Scarito Park Benefits a Wide Range of People

- Picnic Tables and Gazebo
- Tot Lot, ages 2 - 5
- Playground, ages 5 - 12
- Walking Paths
- Spray Fountain
- Basketball Court
- Kayak Launch
- Grassy Lawn, Trees, and Shrubs
- LID Parking Lot for 16 cars
- Community Garden with 17 Raised Beds

Scarito Park provides a community gathering place, opportunities to enjoy the outdoors, and active recreation. The team effort between the City, non-profit community groups, private corporations, and private citizens transformed a vacant, contaminated lot into a natural haven and place of civic pride.

### Our House for Design and Technology

As projects such as the Union and Mechanic Homes and Garden, and Scarito Park took shape, LCW committed new efforts to help build capacity within the neighborhood by embarking on the development of Our House for Design and Technology Community Learning Center, a community center and place for youth and adult education. The Center includes 14,000 square feet with offices, meeting, and classroom space in the redevelopment of a partially demolished former Catholic school building

The idea for Our House came out of recognition that basic education and job training was needed to build community capacity. Interested citizens and former parishioners formed a diverse, multi-ethnic committee to move forward with the idea

and over several years the community was involved at every step of the way.

The first task was to identify a site for the Center. The centrally-located Catholic Church and school that had been vacated quickly became the preferred location, and the committee began working with City and State officials to gain control of the property.



Since LCW did not have money in hand, the CDC and citizens' committee launched what turned out to be a six year fundraising campaign including grant writing, securing earmarks, and grassroots fundraising. Total costs would eventually total \$5.5 million. LCW secured a \$1 million earmark through the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development, as well as \$200,000 from the City to cover demolition and site cleanup costs. The US Department of Housing and Urban Development provided \$380,000 through its Economic Development Initiative program. An additional \$1 million came from New Markets Tax Credits.<sup>19</sup> The remaining \$2.9 million was raised from foundations, individual donors, and community fundraisers ranging from spaghetti dinners to raffles.

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<sup>19</sup> For more information, see [http://www.cdfifund.gov/what\\_we\\_do/programs\\_id.asp?programID=5](http://www.cdfifund.gov/what_we_do/programs_id.asp?programID=5)



Construction took one year, and Our House opened in 2007. Early in the process, the committee decided that they wanted a “green” building, as they were concerned about the environment and operating costs. The building includes solar panels for electricity and hot water, a geothermal system for cooling, and Energy-Star rated lighting fixtures and windows. Recycled-fiber insulation, bricks from demolished portions of the church, and low-VOC paint were also used.



Our House is open for youth to congregate after school to do home work, play games, take courses, or just hang out. Adult programs include English as a Second Language, training for first-time homeowners, and computer classes. The Center

also offers Individual Development Accounts<sup>20</sup> matching savings for first time homes, business capitalization, or higher education.

## Lessons Learned

Partnerships involving residents, non-profits, the public, and private sectors build on the strengths of many to achieve important community goals. Community process is extremely important for achieving long-term buy-in, commitment, and meeting real needs. It also builds civic capacity that transcends individual projects and spills over into participation with community organizations, volunteering, and engagement in civic life.

Redevelopment in older industrial areas is fraught with unexpected hurdles ranging from contaminated sites to murky land ownership. Any of these could derail redevelopment efforts unless there is local leadership with the tenacity to find solutions to complicated roadblocks.

Creating amicable relationships between the private, public and non-profit sectors will have long-term payoffs. Identifying and engaging private sector leaders can help bring in additional private investment.

With creative design, old mills can breathe new life into a neighborhood while retaining their architectural charm. Planning and visioning at a neighborhood level and beyond can help integrate adjoining districts, and create an area with both daytime and nighttime activity.

Incorporating green development in low income communities has long-term benefits, particularly

in reducing energy costs. It is extremely challenging to secure sufficient financial support especially for projects that combine affordable housing with green development.<sup>21</sup>

Making the process fun, convenient, and meaningful helps keep people engaged. Meetings should have a clear purpose and parameters for discussion with demonstrated results and respect for people's time. Provide child care. Always serve food!



Block by block, the people in Lawrence have demonstrated a strong commitment to reinvestment in the North Common neighborhood and the Mill District. These successful developments have helped attract additional investment transforming this once-forgotten area of the City.

## Sources

*Chet and Gary Sidell, Bell Tower Development*  
*Jessica Andors, Lawrence Community Works*  
*Kate O'Brien, Groundwork Lawrence*

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<sup>20</sup> Matches come from a variety of public and private sources. For more information about IDAs, see <http://www.cfed.org/focus.m?parentid=374&siteid=374&id=374>.

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<sup>21</sup> The Massachusetts Technology Collaborative is working to address this through its Green Affordable Housing Initiative. For more information, see [http://www.masstech.org/RenewableEnergy/afford\\_housing.htm](http://www.masstech.org/RenewableEnergy/afford_housing.htm)