

Senate Community Relations Committee meeting

12:00 – 2:00 p.m.

Larimer field Trip

April 16, 2013

Attendees: Kim Barlow, University Times; Amelia Brause, SGB; Laurie Cohen, ULS, CRC Co-Chair; Sabina Deitrick, UCSUR; Maggie Folan, Nursing; Linda Hartman, HSLS; Lovie J. Jackson, Social Work; Kannu Sahni, Director for Community Relations; Gale Schwartz, CHS; Tara Sherry-Torres, OPDC; Trevor Smith, CHS; Tracy Soska, Social Work; John Wilds, Assistant Vice-Chancellor for Community Relations, Mary Davidson Williams, OBID; Yiwei Zhang, OPDC.

The CRC went to Larimer for this Spring's field trip, and were hosted by Fred Brown, the Associate Director of Program Development at the Kingsley Center, and Miss Donna Jackson, from the Larimer Consensus Group.

We began our tour at the Energy & Environment Community Outreach (EECO) Center. Opened in April, 2012, this project was an initiative of Senator Ferlo's, and it exists to raise awareness of environmental concerns and sustainability. The building itself serves as an example of green building techniques and combines features like permeable pavements and storm water runoff outdoors, with solar panels and energy efficient heating and cooling systems. There are thirty-three solar panels on the roof, and a five-hundred gallon rain tank used for landscape irrigation. Two of the thermal panels provide the heating for the hot water supply. It was formerly an abandoned gas station on the corner of East Liberty Boulevard and Larimer Avenue. The site is owned by the URA and operated by Pittsburgh Community Services, Inc.

The EECO Center is used for workforce development training and work readiness programs, classes at the Micro-Business Institute, energy utility assistance, and as a resource for sustainability issues. There are green building demonstrations there, along with recycling drop-offs, and home assessments as part of the Neighborhood Safety Program. The Neighborhood Safety Program is one of their most successful endeavors, and was started by Tracy Soska. Home inspectors do an assessment and then install safety equipment where needed.

Larimer's goal is to become the first green sustainable community in Pittsburgh, and to that end, when they meet with developers to discuss housing initiatives, green building principles are part of the planning process. So far, twenty houses have been retrofitted using green techniques so that their carbon footprints are lessened. The group recently won a Love Your Block award grant for planting the median strip on East Liberty Boulevard. They are looking for best practices around the country to help them meet their goals. Related to those goals are behavioral changes with the residents in reducing their carbon footprints.

There is a community garden, which we visited, and gtech worked with the Larimer Green Team to create the forty planting beds. The community garden has been called "the heart of the community" for the last five years. There are plans to raise vegetables in that garden and give them away at the Kingsley Center. This site may change in the future as development takes off. There are plans for a stage across the street from the garden, to serve as the Larimer Village Green. Bricks from the gardens have been gathered and cleaned off for use in a future community oven.

One potential project is to create an urban farm in Larimer, since they are located in a food desert. The use of Electronic Benefits Transfers, or EMTs, is larger at the East Liberty Whole Foods than anywhere

else in the state. “Residents that constitute the geographic area are choosing Whole Foods even when Target and Giant Eagle are in their vicinity.” There are plans to perform an asset map of the area and engage community residents in this proposal to see if an urban farm is viable. Cabbage, lettuce, and tilapia could be grown there.

There are four core programs within the Larimer Community Plan and the Larimer Vision Plan: Community Sustainability and Development; Education and Training; Family Services; and Health & Recreation. The Vision Plan is focused on taking Larimer off the grid and helping the community realize their desires and expectations. They also want to develop a work-ready workforce.

A community investment strategy emerged from the Urban Leadership Institute and the Urban Green Growth Collaborative, which attracted fifteen hundred people. Another program is called Training for Transition. This group looks at the community to determine methods of attacking utility costs. This involves developing the apparatus for mentoring community leaders. Thirty-seven people participated in the Training for Transition program, which was a first.

Fred Brown has presented his plans for Larimer on both the national and international level at conferences, and is a member of the President’s Climate Commitment Committee. His goals for the Kingsley Association are to develop and operate new and innovative programs and foster the empowerment of youth and their families. Mr. Brown recently presented a session with evolveEA principal Christine Mondor, entitled *Creating a Living City*, and the two have worked together to present ideas about Ecodistricts and sustainability. The Kingsley Association serves clientele from twenty-six different zip codes. One of their models for development was Greensburg, Kansas, which re-built itself as a green community after being destroyed by a tornado in 2007.

A Brookings Institute study on population loss mentioned the “brain drain” in Larimer, Homewood, and Garfield in 2011. Larimer’s population was once 13,000 and has shrunk to 1100. To that end, there is a family support program which examines developmental delays in children 0-6 years old and pairs them with social workers. Other programs include the Fatherhood Initiative and the Freedom School summer program. A Baby Promise program gives toddlers tablets in which the games apps are replaced with educational apps.

The Kingsley Association also partners with the Fred Rogers Institute, and offers an Urban Water Safety Program. There is also a Junior Urban Leadership Institute, which prepares youth for civic engagement and workforce development. In addition, the Kingsley Association’s Health and Wellness Project offers yoga classes, an aerobics studio, health coaches, and classes in diabetes and hypertension prevention.

The community has a Land Use Vision Plan, which is to create a large green open space with houses moved back to the other side of that area. They are using Imagine Larimer Software as a tool for community meetings and input. The software presents the current grid of streets, homes, and other features of Larimer on a touch screen platform. Trees, gardens, and housing can be dragged and dropped into new locations, and as each change is made, counters at the top of the screen calculate the effect of those changes on the air quality, walkability, crime reduction, and healthy food access options. After the changes are made on the screen, you can produce a printout of the new map, with dollars saved in energy costs and links to agencies that provide more information to the new configuration.

More than forty residents have been trained on how to use this software, and clickers are given out at community meetings for residents to weigh in during meetings. There are community charettes to

discuss proposed changes to the streetscape, and they have created a podcast called “What’s Working in Pittsburgh.” One of the questions they are dealing with in the community meetings is how to grow and improve Larimer without incurring gentrification. Some of the issues they want to address are improving the region’s water cycle, creating solar farms, and forming nutritional strategies. In terms of water use, they have some below-grade storage units on the hillside overlooking Washington Boulevard that could be used for water, and they could also restore natural wetlands in the area.

Submitted on May 16, 2013 by Laurie Cohen

Next CRC meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, May 21, 2013