Lancaster, Pennsylvania: Roberto Clemente Park

Unearthing More than Contamination: A Community Redevelopment Process Uncovers Old Tensions and Helps Build Relationships

When Lancaster resident James Jones thinks back several years ago to Roberto Clemente Park he remembers a poorly maintained ball field, strewn with litter. A gathering place for illegal drug activity and loud get-togethers, the park was a nuisance for the neighborhood. For many years the park was underutilized, but in the 1990s a Latino baseball organization adopted the ball field as their hub and strived to maintain it. As the organization’s popularity grew and an increasing number of baseball games were played on the field, other sectors of the community felt excluded from using the park and resented what they perceived as the group’s dominance over the greenspace. Tension had been brewing beneath the surface in the neighborhood for some time, but it wasn’t until planning efforts began in 2002 for Roberto Clemente Park’s redevelopment that conflict really erupted.

The Inner City Group, the park’s lead non-profit redeveloper and community development corporation (CDC), hoped to spark widespread improvement in the Duke Street corridor by rejuvenating Roberto Clemente Park. The organization quickly set out to engage the community in a collaborative visioning process, unprepared for how contentious community interactions would become. After a public meeting filled with angry and yelling residents, it was clear that a more involved public participation process would be necessary. The Inner City Group found itself facing the sobering task of persuading a fractured community to begin a process of challenging their perceptions, communicating openly, and compromising.

Redevelopment Begins!

The South Duke Street Neighborhood and Roberto Clemente Park

The South Duke Street neighborhood had been in transition and decline for several decades. Historically an African American community, recent years saw the arrival of many Latino immigrants. In the 1970s the 3.5-acre site, which formerly housed an umbrella handle manufacturer, a dry cleaning establishment, a scrap yard and row homes, was redeveloped as a neighborhood ball field during the urban renewal movement. All of the buildings were torn down and debris was buried beneath the park.

Participants were caught off guard when the historic fill was discovered on-site well into the planning process. Fortunately, the Lancaster County Planning Commission had recently received an EPA Brownfields Assessment Demonstration Pilot grant which enabled the Commission to pay for environmental assessments and guide the Inner City Group through the assessment and remediation process. A variety of contaminants, including lead and arsenic, were ultimately discovered at the site. With the Commission’s assistance, the site ultimately obtained Release of Liability through the Pennsylvania Department.
The discovery of contamination meant that residents had to tolerate lengthy delays, but the redevelopment team worked hard to inform residents of remediation activities.

Today neighbors consider Roberto Clemente Park an asset to the community. This fine public space features an attractive and well-maintained park, a new playground for children, and a safer refuge from the hustle and bustle of city life. Although the process of revitalizing the park was difficult for community planners and residents alike, everyone agrees that involving the community in earnest was critically important for redeveloping the park successfully and repairing the neighborhood’s social fabric.

The Community Speaks!

“We come in and we plan for these public meetings and we think we know what the problems are and then we get there and [the residents say], ‘Oh, you have no idea...this is the issue here,’ and it’s something we never even thought about.”

Mary Gattis-Schell, Land Recycling Specialist, Lancaster County Planning Commission

Not wanting to repeat the mistakes of the urban renewal movement where citizens were excluded from decisions affecting their neighborhoods, the Inner City Group aimed to have an extensive public participation process. First, the CDC hired a team of consultants to prepare some initial plans for the park’s redevelopment. Then, they conducted focus groups and business meetings followed by a series of three public meetings where the consultants’ ideas were shared with the community. Quickly, however, Inner City Group director Jane Thomas realized that an even more involved public participation process would be necessary. She explains, “Everything changed after our second public meeting when everybody came out thinking that we had all these plans for the neighborhood without consulting them and that’s when it was just very, very ugly...and so we said, ‘Okay, all right we’ll throw this all out. If you sit down with us we’ll arrange meetings and we’ll talk about this and you let us know what needs to happen.’”

The Inner City Group decided to start from scratch and allow the community to guide the consultants in their quest to create a new design for the park. To direct this process, the Group formed the South Duke Street Neighborhood Task Force and encouraged as many people as were interested to be involved—especially those who were most upset—since they realized that finding common ground would only be possible when people could speak openly about their concerns. This process turned out to be highly painful, as longstanding racial tensions surfaced and anger flared. Inner City Group board member and neighborhood resident Carlos Graupera recalls:
“The community meetings were unpleasant, really unpleasant—highly insulting to groups of people, but we went through it and nobody died. Then we used the professional consultants to really…[guide] our decisions…you can argue what happens in [a meeting], but when you inject into the process some professional engineering and design people and they say, ‘This is what you can do and this is what you can’t do,’ [it] does kind of solve the issue.”

The consultants helped to facilitate the meetings and ensure that everyone’s voice was heard. They were adept at managing challenging community interactions and gained the neighborhood’s trust as unbiased, outside experts. Plans were altered based on the community’s wishes. For example, initial blueprints calling for night lighting were discarded when the community expressed apprehension due to concerns about safety and attracting unwanted behaviors. Ultimately 20 public meetings were held over the course of a year.

Despite the raucous nature of the meetings, they were not always well attended. In the beginning especially, meetings were dominated by the most vocal and angry members of the community whose opinions were not broadly representative. As Carlos Grauera explains, “When somebody’s upset at something they don’t fail to show up…so the question was: how do you get the people who are not angry and not negative to participate? And that’s harder because they stay home and you don’t get their point of view…so we had to be careful that that was not the message that became crystallized and kind of became truth there after awhile.”

Jane Thomas agrees and adds that “there were a few neighbors that were not angry that we really coaxed into coming to these meetings, but it was hard for them because it was so antagonistic.” Some segments of the community were noticeably underrepresented during most of the meetings even though they were the main users of the park. Despite ample publicity and a concerted effort from one of the baseball community’s main organizers to encourage people to attend, the Latino population’s attendance at meetings was scarce.

After dozens of meetings and compromise from all sides, the community and consultants settled on a plan that most residents supported. Carlos Grauera explains “I think there’s a sense that people were dealt with fairly. People were listened to. Not everybody got everything they wanted out of it, but everybody nudged a little bit and I think that creates a sense of well-being in the community. Nobody got abused…as a result of it and everybody was informed. Doesn’t mean the people have to like it. Doesn’t mean people have to, you know, love each other either, but things got better.” Neighborhood resident James Jones agrees: “The differences that we had, we were able to work them out.”

**Lesson Learned**

The recipient of several awards and national recognition, many consider Roberto Clemente Park as an exemplary brownfields project and pinnacle of redevelopment success. The park is now clean, safe, attractive, and a true asset to the community. Property values have increased in the surrounding areas as well, and small business owners are benefiting from the increased equity in their properties. Youth now have a space to call their own and are more likely to take ownership for their neighborhood and feel pride in their surroundings since they have witnessed positive change that directly benefits them.
Although the project has brought many benefits to the neighborhood, serious challenges remain. Rarely spoken of shortcomings, such as the absence of bathrooms, limit the park’s use because youth baseball organizations choose to play in other parks with facilities. Hosting structured youth sports was one of the neighborhood’s primary goals, but a compromise solution which would have addressed neighbors’ concerns about safety and aesthetics while allowing for permanent or temporary bathroom facilities was not achieved. Additionally, the park’s primary former users, the adult Latino baseball community, have been essentially excluded from enjoying the park as they are no longer able to play their games on the newly configured, youth-sized baseball diamond. Maintenance, although much improved, continues to be a challenge at times. Nevertheless, the park’s revitalization greatly enhances the community.

The biggest success, however, is not the park itself but the process of public involvement. This time consuming and arduous exercise helped to nurture feelings of community, increase communication, and build a reputation of success from which future redevelopment ventures may launch. As a result of the process, many participants came to realize that what seemed to be racial tensions were actually concerns about the ways in which the park had historically been used and abused. Many residents had been fed up with the community’s decline for some time, but prior to the meetings they did not have meaningful opportunities to express their opinions. Carlos Graupera explains that “those meetings were there to create some common ground. People in this neighborhood were so…alienated and marginalized and so bitter and so confused about things that they just needed some process of venting out…some way of building common ground.”

Without the community involvement process, Jane Thomas believes that the project would not have been successful. She insists, “There’s no substitute for having a good community process for what needs to happen at a site. I mean if we had gone ahead and just improved Roberto Clemente Park, it would have been a mess by now...because the neighborhood would have been upset. There would have been no buy-in.” Fortunately, the community accepts and respects its new asset and the neighborhood continues to improve. More projects are underway, and residents have much to look forward to. Although some residents were initially skeptical about the neighborhood’s ability to recover, most people agree that conditions have improved. As Carlos Graupera exclaims, “Anybody that says that things didn’t get better is kind of crazy...the evidence is there and the evidence is rather dramatic.”