

The Prospects of Active Community Support for the Woonasquatucket River Greenway Project

by

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Abstract

The Woonasquatucket River Greenway Project (WRGP), will run primarily through the community of Olneyville, in Providence, Rhode Island. Olneyville is a community which has many of the ills of urban America: high poverty, crime, vacancy, and transience. According to public statements, the WRGP is intended to: increase recreational opportunities, improve environmental quality, and attract business and residents to Olneyville.

The Providence Plan, the facilitating agency of the WRGP, and other groups involved describe the WRGP as a grassroots project that is community-led. My investigations have revealed that such designations are not appropriate or realistic for this project.

This project was not started by residents of Olneyville or by any other local residential community. Yet, because the WRGP has been described as a project that is grassroots and community led, it is assumed that ultimately the community will actively support it. The case studies of Sauer Park in New York City and Meridian Hill Park in Washington DC demonstrate what active support entails- community leadership in the development and maintenance of the project. Such leadership is a serious commitment on the part of the community. That the Olneyville community did not initiate the WRGP, calls into question the public assumptions of the Providence Plan that the residents of Olneyville eventually will devote time and energy to become leaders of this project.

Such a presumption so far appears to be unwarranted. First, the Providence Plan has not established the credibility in Olneyville that would be necessary to make an effective request for active community support from these residents. Second, such a request faces strong competition from the other daily demands on these residents to provide immediate necessities like food, shelter, and clothing to themselves and their families.

Thus, it is not surprising that such active community support has not yet happened for the WRGP. A few people attend the community meetings and events that the Providence Plan sponsors, but no one has demonstrated leadership at these events- no residents have accepted responsibility of the WRGP independent of the Providence Plan. No group comparable to the community groups in Sauer or Meridian Hill Parks has emerged. As of now, only passive support has been generated for the project, and that may well be all that the project can reasonably be expected to generate.

Therefore, the WRGP should not be understood as a grassroots or community-led project, nor should such active support be so confidently expected. Further, active community support should not be so presumed from any of the communities along the proposed greenway route, not just Olneyville. A more realistic expectation is that this project could be a resource for the communities along the Woonasquatucket River that could gain passive community support. The Providence Plan should continue its efforts to generate this passive support in Olneyville. In addition, they should acknowledge that the WRGP is a *regional* project and should invite this type of passive support to the other

communities along the proposed greenway route. Area recreational groups should also be solicited for their support of the project.

This research is based upon newspaper and magazine articles; books; interviews of people involved in the WRGP, Sauer Park, Meridian Hill Park, and people living and working in Olneyville; and observance of community meetings in Olneyville.

Introduction

Most of my classes at Brown University explore the problems of urban American and try to offer strategies and frameworks for addressing these problems in lower income urban communities. As an Environmental Studies concentrator, I have been interested in how greenspace can play a role in the revitalization of these neighborhoods. With my thesis research, I wanted to look specifically at how these greenspace projects are supported by their surrounding communities. I have therefore focused my research on an urban greenspace project in a lower income community in Providence.

The Woonasquatucket River Greenway Project (WRGP) is designated to have recreational, environmental, aesthetic, and economic benefits for Olneyville, a neighborhood in Providence. The WRGP is also designated to generate active community support. With my thesis research, I wanted to explore whether such active community support is happening for the WRGP and whether such active community support can be expected to happen.

I first set out to define what active community support for an urban greenspace project in a lower income community means. The case studies of Sauer Park in New York City and Meridian Hill Park in Washington DC comprise the basis of such a definition.

I then provide a background of the WRGP and of the community the project primarily runs through, Olneyville. From there, I assess the community

support the project has been generating and the support the project is able to generate.

My research is based on phone and personal interviews with the various people involved with the WRGP, Sauer Park and Meridian Hill Park, and with the people living and working in Olneyville. I have also attended community meetings in Olneyville which address the WRGP and other issues as well. Newspaper articles and books also serve as the foundations for my research.

I have tried with such research to arrive at an objective analysis of the role community support can play in the Woonasquatucket River Greenway Project. Granted, this analysis is based only on a year of investigation, and the information I was able to gather was limited by the fact that I am an outsider to the WRGP and not intimately involved with the project. However, as an outsider analyzing the WRGP, I do feel that I have offered this project an objective, non-partisan, perspective into the issues of community support.

The Providence Plan is constantly described, by its literature and by its staff, as a catalyst in the revitalization of Providence. While their Woonasquatucket River Greenway Project may well act as a catalyst for recreational opportunities, a cleaner environment, and perhaps economic improvements in Olneyville, as this thesis demonstrates, it is highly unlikely to act as a catalyst for community organization. Therefore, I recommend that the WRGP seek broader support for this project, and expect and accept a lower-level of commitment from Olneyville.

Chapter 1:

Cases of Active Community Support: Sauer Park and Meridian Hill Park

Urban greenspace projects *can* happen in lower income communities. While many of these triumphs pass silently and undocumented through the worlds of academia and politics, there are two in particular, Sauer Park and Meridian Hill Park, that deserve special attention. The stories of Sauer Park in New York City and Meridian Hill Park in Washington DC demonstrate that these projects can occur successfully and can also be *sustained*. These communities actively supported the development of greenspace in their neighborhoods: they initiated these projects and became leaders in the development and maintenance of the greenspace. These communities' desire, energy, and hard work have been crucial to the acquisition and sustainability of greenspace in their neighborhoods. Such factors enabled these communities to overcome the sometimes unyielding forces of politics, crime, poverty, and substance abuse that traditionally govern such neighborhoods. I was able to derive the following stories from newspaper articles and conversations with residents active in these projects.

Sauer Park, New York City

Sauer Park was christened in 1934 for John C. Sauer, a WWI neighborhood hero, as one of nine War Memorial playgrounds in New York City dedicated that year¹. The area around the park, which is located on East 12th Street between Avenues A and B, has long been home to immigrants to the United States, occupied in the earlier part of this century by Irish and Polish immigrants and now predominately settled by Hispanic immigrants. The neighborhood is highly subject to crime and other urban social ills, where three quarters of the children live in households below the poverty line². The park up to the early 1990's, became like many other parks in New York- a place for drugs, the homeless, and violent crime, a place no child or family would even consider using as a recreational space.

The playground to many residents represented the neighborhood' degeneration. In October of 1985, the neighbors around the playground organized a rally at Mary Help of Christians church to 'clean up the block' and their primary issue was to do something about Sauer Park³. In a story about Sauer Park *The New York Times* quoted a resident with saying

'I always thought of it as a microcosm of everything that was going on,' said Roberto Velez, whose throat still bears scars from stab wounds he received on Halloween night thirteen years ago a half of a block away. 'It was a really sad place, a scary place, a place to make a real stand. It was the last battleground.'⁴

¹ Patricia Leigh Brown, "Reclaiming a Park for Play" *The New York Times* , 12 September 1993.

² Brown.

³ Brown.

⁴ Brown.

Following the rally, New York City Parks Commissioner Henry Stern received a petition of 500 signatures to erect a fence around the park and to return the park to the people of the neighborhood. In December of 1985, Sauer Park got a chain link fence which still let in the drug dealers and vandals, but it was still symbolic guard. The Parks Department also agreed to finance a new design for the playground, with construction to begin in 1988. However, the community around the park did not want this playground to become yet another bleak, “black asphalt cave with a basketball hoop”⁵, urban recreational area. The community wanted to help the city design the park.

Such a concept is fairly unheard of in a deeply rooted bureaucracy like the New York City Parks Department. Traditionally, the city contracts a design firm to plan a standard asphalt playground. It eventually gets built, and the community around the park is lucky even to be told when the project may be completed. Those involved with the rehabilitation of Sauer Park passed out photocopies of the outline of the park and colored pencils to the neighborhood, encouraging people to draw out their vision for the park. Members of the community turned out to have similar desires for the park- they wanted a lot of grassy, soft spaces with trees and comfortable benches. This type of high maintenance design is also nearly unheard of in a Parks Department strapped for maintenance funds. However, the neighbors of the park agreed to be fully responsible for the maintenance of such greenspaces, and they signed a contract with the Parks Department outlining such a commitment. They agreed to clean up the park, to do the plantings, and to program any recreational

⁵ Ana Izizarry, quoted in Brown.

activities, while the Parks Department agreed to supply trash bags and to pick up the trash regularly. With such a contract, the city agreed to the community's design.

For the next few years, the neighbors around the park tried to get the renovations through the Parks Department's and the local community board's budget. It is here where the energy, perseverance, and determination of local residents was critical. These residents first hand experienced the problems they are trying to help solve with this park. Therefore, this frustration and anger gave the residents the *motivation* to see this project through. For example, a resident, Ana Izizarry, crashed a Parks Department bus tour of the area and forced the tour to go by Sauer Park, so that the Manhattan City Parks Commissioner, Patrick Pomposello, would see what the park was like. According to Fiohna O' Grady, another active resident, Pomposello, "...didn't know that was their property, or that it even existed. He was like, "This is our property? You need to call me tomorrow."⁶ After this, the Parks Department was a bit more receptive to the project- more officials knew about it, but it was continually bumped off the budget when budget increases fell through.

In 1990, Ana Izizarry and Stephanie Mar won seats to the local community board, an entity that controls how certain city funding gets allocated to a particular community. From this place of power, Izizarry and Mar acted as guardians to the park through the community board's budget. In 1990, the park was number 16 on the board's priority list, and the following year, the park

⁶ Fiohna O' Grady, telephone interview, 22 March 1996.

became priority number 5⁷. However, it was not until borough president Ruth Messinger intervened that the park acquired the adequate funding. In 1991, after hearing requests from the community throughout this whole process, Messinger used the discretionary funds for that year to finance the rehabilitation of the park. Ground was finally broken on May 28, 1992, seven years after the first community rally.

Currently, Sauer Park consists of open greenspaces and play equipment and is surrounded by plants. The Friends of Sauer Park have lived up to their contract with the Parks Department: they open and close the park daily, attend to the weeding and cleaning of the park, and program recreational activities such as karate during the summer. Because the residents designed the park and developed the recreational opportunities for the park, the park sponsors a design and programs that residents will actually *use*. The motivation used to get the park renovated is now transferred to the maintenance of this greenspace. Children use the park extensively, so many that any plant that is shorter than the average toddler is quickly trampled and the Friends group will have to plant taller shrubs this coming spring⁸. Fiohna O' Grady notes, "I think we are noted as the best kept small park in Manhattan, in terms of volunteer effort."⁹

If it was not for these residents, the park would probably remain as it was 10 years ago. Even if the Parks Department decided to revamp the park, they probably would have just repaved it with asphalt. It was the community's tenacity

⁷ Brown.

⁸ Gregory Montroy, telephone interview, 14 March 1996.

and willingness to maintain the park that a Sauer Park of green grass and plants now exist in a neighborhood that is usually considered the “the inner city.” It is such community support that won the neighborhood a park and which leads to the sustainability of the park.

Meridian Hill Park, Washington DC

Meridian Hill Park was built between 1912 and 1936 in Washington DC, and is bounded by 15th, 16th, and Euclid and W Streets, NW. The twelve acre park was commissioned by the Commission of Fine Arts and was one of the first formal parks in the United States to combine architectural and horticultural elements. The park is divided into two parts with a Renaissance theme- one housing an Italian garden with statues, pools, and fountains, and the other housing promenades with views to Washington DC’s monuments. The park derived its name from a marker Thomas Jefferson placed on the territory, a marker which he had hoped would act as the meridian of the world and replace the Greenwich marker.

Years went by, and the park and the area around the park gradually became less of a playground for Washington’s elite. A 1968 riot had its epicenter two blocks away from the park. In the 1970’s, the park took on a name with very different political implications- local Black activists unofficially renamed the park Malcolm X Park, to commemorate the fact that Malcolm X once spoke

⁹ O’ Grady.

there. (The park is still called Malcolm X Park by some local residents.) The area surrounding the park became home to immigrants and to lower income residents. Currently, within a 10 block radius of the park, the racial/ethnic breakdown is: 45% African American, 45% Latino, and 10% White¹⁰.

Since the 1970's Meridian Hill Park, like Sauer Park, became the incubator of crime. The press was very active in covering such illicit activity and the Park developed a nefarious reputation not only in the community surrounding it, but city-wide as well. From the 1980's on *The Washington Post* hosted articles about the Park with titles like, "Dark Side of a Park: Meridian Hill's Gardens Haunts of Drug Dealers" (8/30/81), Washington's Jewel of a Park Losing its Luster to Vandalism" (2/24/90), "Indifference Greets Bloody Victim in Park" (8/6/91), "Man Stabbed to Death in Meridian Hill Park" (3/3/92). On August 15, 1989, the following letter to the editor, titled "Call it 'Crack Park,'" was submitted to *The Washington Post*

During the 1960's, the District's Meridian Hill Park at 16th and Florida Avenue NW either officially or unofficially became known as "Malcolm X Park" in honor of the late civil rights leader, who, I understand, once spoke there. In recognition of what this space is primarily used for today, underscored by the recent discovery of the bullet-riddled body of a young man (Metro, Aug. 7), I would like to suggest renaming this public area once again. "Crack Park" is much more in step with our times.

Malcolm X would have been insulted to have his name associated with this nightmare drug market.¹¹

The year 1990 proved, however, to be the turning point for the park. The murder of a young boy near the park on Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday of that year galvanized the already existing Reed Cooke Neighborhood Association to

¹⁰ Steven Coleman, telephone interview, 12 March 1996.

call a town meeting in the living room of a local resident, Steven Coleman¹². A community crime patrol was the result of the meeting, and nightly patrols of the park began shortly thereafter.

A *Washington Post* story ran shortly thereafter on February 24, 1990. The story detailed the decline of the park and quoted officials who stated that the community did not care about the park- apparently unaware of the crime patrol group.

“What Meridian Hill Park needs is some friends to look out for it,” said Darwina Neal, a landscape architect who is chief of the National Park Service Designing Services.....

Unlike other, less grand parks in residential Washington, neighbors who live around Meridian Hill Park don't seem to think of it as their park, said Roland Swain, superintendent of federal parks in Northwest and Northeast Washington. “I get no calls about Meridian Hill,” he said. “I hear from the neighbors of Glover-Archbold, Fort Reno, Rock Creek Park, Fort Stevens and Fort Slocum parks. They are quick to call us for anything they think is wrong.” Swain said many of the people who spend time in Meridian Hill Park are transient users who don't feel a proprietary interest in the park.¹³

The next day, Swain received numerous phone calls from people who cared about Meridian Hill Park, particularly those involved in the crime patrol group. They told him that the reason why they never called before was that they had no idea that the park was owned by the National Park Service- there were no signs and they never saw any National Park Service officials. Ten days later, Swain meet with the callers and together they formally formed Friends of Meridian Hill (FOMH) and opened an office for the group's and park's management.

¹¹ John Barrat, letter, *The Washington Post*, 15 August 1989.

¹² Steven Coleman, letter to the Trust for Public Land, 20 July 1995.

¹³ Linda Wheeler, “Washington's Jewel of a Park Losing its Luster to Vandalism” *The Washington Post*, 24 February 1990.

This group, headed by Steve Coleman, proceeded to launch activities to clean up the park and involve the community in order to “replace the crime with something positive.”¹⁴ The group organized its first Earth Day clean up in April of 1990. FOMH also had a policy for its patrollers that they should say hello to whoever they met on their night shifts because, “the point was to build community for everybody, including who had been drug dealing. We weren’t against the dealers, we were against the dealing.”¹⁵

The group continues to grow in membership and its success is vast. The National Park Service is responsible for the basic daily maintenance tasks of lawn mowing, trash removal, bathroom maintenance, and Park Police Patrol. The FOMH is responsible for all of the interpretative programs, performances, tree maintenance/planting, flower planting, tours of the park, marketing and media coverage of the park, historical research, park advocacy with Congress, fund-raising, and policy making for the park. The work of the crime patrol has caused the crime in the park to drop by 90% since 1990¹⁶. The group organizes regular clean ups, concerts, and historic re-enactments to attract people to the park and to improve its image. The group also been quite creative in the projects they organize: they try to get local non-profit, social service groups to use the park as a meeting place or a training ground; hold re-interpretation events for the statues in the park to bring them modern contexts (such as holding a 580th birthday party for Joan of Arc and re-dedicating the statute to all of the modern

¹⁴ Steven Coleman, telephone interview, 12 March 1996.

¹⁵ Coleman.

¹⁶ Linda Wheeler, “Adding Bursts of Color to Meridian Hill Park” *The Washington Post*, 28 September 1995.

day Joan of Arcs- young girls living in the inner city¹⁷); schedule programs educating people about non-violence; provide the homeless, mentally disabled, and substance addicts with referrals; hold neighborhood environment programs; and launch a city wide ad campaign for the park.

The energy and success of the group has brought much recognition to the park, in terms of donations from non-profits and individuals. (FOMH refuses to accept government funding, feeling that would represent a conflict of interest when they lobby Congress for the development of more urban parks nationwide.) Like Sauer Park, the residents actively supporting Meridian Hill Park first hand experienced the problems that they are trying to address with the rehabilitation of the park. This frustration has led to an incredible will and perseverance to improve the park and to keep such improvements sustainable.

The group currently has a membership of 900 local residents and is sponsored by 300 non-profit organizations. This is a dramatic transformation from the days when people felt it should be called “Crack Park.” All of these programs and events would not have been possible without the support of the FOMH, and without the residents living around the park. There is no way that the National Park Service would have the money, knowledge, or creativity to get all of this done. It was the community, so strongly frustrated by what the park had become, who had the knowledge of what it would take to get the park to turn around, who had the creativity to approach generic social ills in innovative ways, and the energy behind all of this to go after the appropriate funding sources.

¹⁷ Coleman.

Such community input into the recreational programming of the park ensures that these events are appropriate for these residents- residents will design what will be suitable to them. It is this community support which has led to the sustained rejuvenation of Meridian Hill Park. President Clinton gave his 1994 Earth Day address from Meridian Hill Park and called the park

...a great, incredible tribute to the people in this community. That's the most important thing I think we can say or do today, just to recognize the power of ordinary citizens to rebuild their own lives, environmentally, responsibly, and make their lives better at the same time. You are a shining example of that.¹⁸

Conclusion

Sauer Park and Meridian Hill Park are both testimonies that urban greenspaces in lower income communities *can* happen. These communities took an *active* role in overseeing the development and sustainability of these greenspace projects. These projects are *community* led: the communities surrounding these parks initiated the rehabilitation efforts of their parks, took a leadership role in the development of these projects, and made a commitment to play prominent roles in ensuring the sustainability of these projects.

¹⁸ William Clinton, Transcript of Remarks by President at Earth Day Event, U.S. Newswire, 21 April 1994.

Chapter 2:

Background of the Woonasquatucket River

Greenway Project and Olneyville

Background of the Woonasquatucket River Greenway Project

Origins

The idea of the Woonasquatucket River Greenway Project originated with Ken Payne, an advisor to Senator Pell, and Michael Rich, then the director of the Providence Plan. Mr. Payne and Mr. Rich spearheaded the movement to make this project a reality. In January of 1994, the Providence Plan and the National Park Service announced the creation of the Woonasquatucket River Greenway Project (WRGP). According to the Providence's Plan proposal to the National Park Service, the purposes of the WRGP

are to conserve this natural resource, provide opportunities to restore water quality and wildlife habitats and provide recreational opportunities in

conjunction with the rehabilitation of existing facilities and the development of new parks, rights-of-ways, and open space¹.

The Woonasquatucket River begins from the northwest in Smithfield, flows to downtown Providence, and merges with the Moshassuck River to form the Providence River. The proposed project calls for the construction of a 4.4 mile greenway along the river, primarily through the community of Olneyville, but also extending through Smith Hill, Valley, Hartford, Manton and Downtown. This greenway may potentially include amenities like bike paths, walking trails, and open space. The project also calls for the greenway's connection to and rehabilitation of three parks: Merino Park, Dyerville Park, and Donnigan Park.

In addition to the development of a greenway, the project has an economic agenda as well. The WRGP is looking to develop the abandoned Riverside Mills and Lincoln Lace mills sites in Olneyville for economic re-use and the project also calls for the establishment of a micro-business loan program for area enterprises. Olneyville was thus selected as the site of this project because like many other lower income urban neighborhoods in America, it is

a community that has very little open space, very little greenspace, very little opportunities for recreation and yet has a dense population and is an area that has been ignored....(There is) a real need to have the river developed as a resource.²

The Players of the WRGP

With this announcement, the National Park Service agreed to provide technical assistance (but not federal funding) to the project under its Rivers,

¹ The Providence Plan, "Woonasquatucket River Greenway: A Proposal for Rails and Trails Conservation Assistance from the National Park Service" June 1993.

Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program. The Providence Plan is a non-profit organization established by the City and State in 1992 to revitalize Providence. This organization, with the announcement, became the caretakers of the WRGP. The group seeks to act as a catalyst for change in Providence by building partnerships with the City and other non-profit groups. The Providence Plan is governed by a ten member board of directors, five appointed by the governor and five appointed by the mayor. Its goals are to

(1) to put people to work, (2) to retain the city's middle class, (3) to make our neighborhoods safe and livable, (4) to improve the quality of public schools, (5) to provide decent and affordable housing, and (6) to increase jobs and taxes in downtown Providence³

From the Providence Plan, the WRGP coordinator is Jane Sherman, and the community outreach coordinator is Arlene Ayala.

In June of 1994, the Trust for Public Land (TPL) became a formal partner with the Providence Plan in the WRGP, designated to coordinate the acquisition of the necessary lands along the proposed greenway route. The Trust for Public Land is a national organization that has been committed to land conservation for people since 1972. TPL has field offices across the nation, and uses their experience in real estate, law, urban planning, government and community relations, fundraising, and public affairs to facilitate land conservation projects nation wide. Working in conjunction with local community groups, government,

² Doug Evans, quoted in Ken Minigis, "Grassroots Project Aims to Transform RIverfront," *The Providence Journal-Bulletin*, 24 January 1994.

³ Providence Plan, "Nomination for Providence, Rhode Island as Designation as an Enterprise Community," June 1994, 2-2.

and businesses, TPL has helped protect over 1,000 parcels of land in the United States- land which totals more than a million acres⁴.

The Woonasquatucket River Greenway Project became part of TPL's Green Cities Initiative program, a program designed to increase the quantity and quality of urban open space in the following cities: Atlanta, Austin, Baltimore, Boston, Cleveland, Los Angeles, Minneapolis/St. Paul, New York, Portland, San Francisco and Seattle.

These three groups became the leaders of the Woonasquatucket River Coalition, a coalition of different groups, institutions, and individuals that have offered their support of the project. The Coalition consists of the following members: RI Department of Environmental Management, RI Department of Transportation, the Mayor's office, Providence Department of Planning and Development, Providence Parks Department, the Neighborhood Empowerment for Prevention Project of the Mayor's Council on Drug and Alcohol Abuse, Save the Bay, Audubon Society of RI, River Rescue, Brown University, Rhode Island School of Design, Narragansett Bay Commission, Nickerson Community Center, Joslin Community Development Corporation, Olneyville Housing Corporation, Olneyville Businessmen's Association, William D' Abate Elementary School, Perry Middle School, and Olneyville Branch Library⁵.

Funding

⁴ The Trust for Public Land, factsheet.

The WRGP received major funding from the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund in November of 1994. The Providence Plan was designated to receive \$419,432 over the next four years for the planning, design and implementation of the WRGP. TPL was designated to receive \$440,200 over the next four years for the arrangement of the acquisition of the necessary property for the project. However, currently, the project has no official "owner" to sponsor the actual construction of the greenway⁶. While the EPA, Department of Environmental Management (DEM), and Department of Transportation (DOT) have expressed interest in the WRGP, none of these parties have offered to sponsor the project officially. These groups have provided what Jane Sherman calls "technical assistance:" DOT has offered \$45,000 for a planning study of the potential bike path and walk way, EPA may offer to begin some tests of the fishes of the river and its general water quality, and DEM has supported the project by not selling Dyerville Park, a critical portion of the greenway path. According to Jane Sherman, there are no immediate potential prospects for an institutional owner of the project⁷. The Providence Plan is also trying to get local environmental groups to be active players in the WRGP- groups like the Audubon Society of Rhode Island, Save the Bay, and River Rescue- but these groups have yet to make an official commitment to be partner in the project.

What Has the WRGP Done So Far?

⁵ Woonasquatucket River Coalition, *Woonasquatucket River News*, Fall 1994

In the past few years, the Providence Plan and the Coalition have been publicizing the prospects of the greenway to the communities surrounding the proposed route, particularly in Olneyville. They are now in the process of holding community meetings facilitated by volunteer architects to get residents' input on the design of the greenway. Such recommendations from the community will be incorporated into the design detailed in the WRGP's master plan. In addition, they have also been publicizing the greenway project to various representatives of the EPA, DOT, DEM, and Department of Planning and Development. The Providence Plan has also been active in the campaign for the re-construction of the pedestrian footbridge over Route 6 that connects the Olneyville and Hartford communities. This bridge was a vital link between these two communities and represented an important access point to Merino Park, which is designated to be part of the WRGP.

Background of Olneyville

Part 1: Historical Context

As the community which the WRG project will primarily run through, the crux of this project's efforts has been focused on Olneyville. This segment and the following segment will paint a picture of a typical old mill town- one which

⁶ Jane Sherman, telephone interview, 14 March 1996.

⁷ Sherman.

flourished during the 1800's and early 1900's, and one which has experienced a steady decline since WWII.

In 1636, Roger Williams acquired the Native American settlement known as Woonasquatucket from the chief sachems Canonibus and Miantonomi of the Narragansett Indians. The Woonasquatucket, which means "at the head of the tidewater," encompassed most of the area that is now known as the Woonasquatucket River Valley.

One of the first recorded White settlers to the Woonasquatucket River Valley was Thomas Clemence, who in 1646 built a home along the banks of the river on a tract of land north of what is now known as Olneyville. Major settlement of the area did not begin until the early 1700's. Today's Weybosset, Westminster, and Plainfield Streets were initially constructed as Plainfield Road in 1714 and connected the center of Providence with the Native American village site at the bend of the Woonasquatucket River. With such a road, trading promptly ensued along the river. In addition, what is now known as Valley Street was originally built by the Ruttenberg family in 1723 for their paper mill and distillery.

In 1785, Christopher Olney settled on the intersection of Broadway and Valley Street. On the wide part of the river north of today's Kossuth Street, Mr. Olney operated a grist mill and a paper mill. Because of his active involvement in the development of the area, Mr. Olney was bestowed the honor of having the region named Olneyville.

By the early 19th century, Olneyville had grown into a major industrial center. Thanks to the water power of the Woonasquatucket River, many mill villages emerged along the banks of the Woonasquatucket. By the late 1840's railroads connected Olneyville to the center of Providence, enabling direct access for the mills' delivery and distribution systems. Water power and railroad access made Olneyville a very lucrative location for many industrial enterprises. Two of the major industries to settle in Olneyville were the Providence Dyeing, Bleaching, and Calendering Company (1846) and Atlantic Mills (1851).

In the late 1800's, the residential development of Olneyville, particularly that around Olneyville Square, was guided by the advent of public transportation to the area. Electric trolleys ran along Atwells Avenue to Academy Avenue by 1895. Such public transportation and the growth of the employment possibilities in Olneyville's mills significantly increased the residential development of Olneyville. Two family houses populated the area between Atwells and Manton Avenues between the 1880's and the 1890's. Many of these homes were built by the mill industries for their employees. During this time, Olneyville also became the home of many immigrants, particularly those from Poland and Ireland.

Residential and economic growth continued through the early 1900's. With the end of World War II, however, Olneyville's textile industry began to

suffer financially and many industries shut down completely or moved. The fall of Olneyville's textile industry caused a dramatic decrease in the population of Olneyville, causing thousands to leave the community to seek alternate employment. In the early 1950's, the construction of Route 6 to ease traffic in Olneyville Square only exacerbated this population decrease by demolishing significant amounts of working class, affordable housing.

In the 1960's, the jewelry industry emerged in Olneyville, but it has been unable to capture the economic heights the textile industry achieved in the late 1800's and early 1900's. This jewelry industry declined through the late 1980's and early 1990's. Olneyville's population continued to drop through the 1970's (according to the 1980 census, 16% of Olneyville's population left during the 1970's⁸), although quite a few jewelry businesses located in the Promenade center and provided hundreds of jobs. Olneyville's population began to stabilize by the 1980's

Part 2: Olneyville Today

The following demographics demonstrate that the faces of Olneyville are changing and that Olneyville is a community of high poverty, unemployment,

vacant homes, crime, and transience. These Olneyville demographics are juxtaposed to demographics of Providence to give the Olneyville data a point of comparison.

⁸ ES 192 Environmental Studies Practicum, History project document, Spring 1994.

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Census of Population and Housing, 1990.

Population- Olneyville

	1980- Number	1980- Percent	1990- Number	1990- Percent	Percent Change 1980-1990
Total Persons	6,485	100.0	5,910	100.0	-8.9
White	5,907	91.1	3,587	60.7	-39.3
Nonwhite	578	8.9	2,323	39.3	301.9
Black	326	5.0	725	12.3	122.4
Hispanic	596	9.2	2,064	34.9	245.3
Asian and Pacific Islander	23	0.4	424	7.2	1,743.5
American Indian, Eskimo, or Aleut	14	0.2	8	0.1	-42.9

Population- Providence

	1980- Number	1980- Percent	1990- Number	1990- Percent	Percent Change 1980-1990
Total Persons	156,804	100.0	160,728	100.0	2.5
White	127,320	81.2	112,893	70.2	-11.3
Nonwhite	29,484	18.8	47,835	29.8	62.2
Black	18,546	11.8	23,387	14.6	26.1
Hispanic	9,071	5.8	23,744	14.8	161.8
Asian and Pacific Islander	1,694	1.1	9,599	6.0	466.6
American Indian, Eskimo, or Aleut	1,048	0.7	1,598	1.0	52.5

Poverty Status- Olneyville

	1980- Number	1980- Percent	1990- Number	1990- Percent	Percent Change 1980-1990
Persons below poverty	1,800	27.6	2,208	37.4	22.7
Families below poverty	397	23.4	498	35.5	25.4
Children below poverty (under 18 years)	847	44.2	1,094	53.9	29.2
Elderly below poverty (65 years and older)	142	14.0	204	27.9	43.7
Persons below 50% poverty level	n/a	n/a	859	14.6	-
Persons below 125% poverty level	2,326	35.5	2,853	48.3	22.7
Persons below 200% poverty level	3,590	54.8	3,828	64.9	6.6

Poverty Status- Providence

	1980- Number	1980- Percent	1990- Number	1990- Percent	Percent Change 1980-1990
Persons below poverty	29,941	20.4	34,120	23.0	14.0
Families below poverty	5,703	15.3	6,461	18.3	13.3
Children below poverty (under 18 years)	10,825	30.2	13, 263	35.0	22.5
Elderly below poverty (65 years and older)	3, 823	16.9	3,835	19.2	0.3
Persons below 50% poverty level	n/a	n/a	12,925	8.7	-
Persons below 125% poverty level	39,699	27.0	43, 176	29.1	8.8
Persons below 200% poverty level	67, 489	45.9	66, 827	45.0	-1.0

Employment- Olneyville

	1980- Number	1980- Percent	1990- Number	1990- Percent	Percent change 1980-1990
Employed	2,367	84.4	2,143	88.7	-9.5
Unemployed	439	15.6	272	11.3	-38.0

Employment- Providence

	1980- Number	1980- Percent	1990- Number	1990- Percent	Percent change 1980-1990
Employed	65,786	90.8	69,200	90.8	5.2
Unemployed	6,632	9.2	7,008	9.2	5.7

Vacant Housing Units- Olneyville

	1980- Number	1980- Percent of total housing units	1990- Number	1990- Percent of total housing units	Percent Change 1980-1990
Vacant housing units	447	14.4	543	19.9	21.5

Vacant Housing Units- Providence

	1980- Number	1980- Percent of total housing units	1990- Number	1990- Percent of total housing units	Percent Change 1980-1990
Vacant housing units	7,338	10.9	7,889	11.8	7.5

Years Householder Moved Into Unit- Olneyville

	1980- Number	1980- Percent	1990- Number	1990- Percent	Percent Change 1980-1990
Within past year	681	25.6	781	32.8	14.7
1 to 5 years ago	609	22.9	624	26.2	2.5
6 to 10 years ago	526	19.8	206	8.6	-60.8
11 to 20 years ago	298	11.2	241	10.1	-19.1
More than 20 years ago	547	20.6	532	22.3	-2.7

Years Householder Moved Into Unit- Providence

	1980- Number	1980- Percent	1990- Number	1990- Percent	Percent Change 1980-1990
Within past year	15,695	32.7	15,762	32.9	0.4
1 to 5 years ago	15,072	31.4	16,305	34.1	8.2
6 to 10 years ago	8,734	18.2	7,810	16.3	-10.6
11 to 20 years ago	8,516	17.7	7,976	16.7	-6.3
More than 20 years ago	12,140	25.3	11,052	23.1	-9.0

Owner/Renter Occupancy- Olneyville

	1980- Number	1980- Percent	1990- Number	1990- Percent	Percent Change 1980-1990
Owner- occupied	27	1.0	21	1.0	-22.2
Renter- occupied	82	3.1	208	9.5	153.7

Owner/Renter Occupancy- Providence

	1980- Number	1980- Percent	1990- Number	1990- Percent	Percent Change 1980-1990
Owner- occupied	602	1.0	588	1.0	-2.3
Renter- occupied	1,541	2.6	2,784	4.7	80.7

The first set of statistics demonstrate that the White population has decreased dramatically in Olneyville, their numbers falling by 39.3% between 1980 and 1990 (the White population in the rest of Providence dropped by 11.3%). Further, the non-White population has increased by 301.9% in Olneyville, while it has increased by 62.2% in the rest of Providence. Poverty in Olneyville has grown in the past few years, and by larger amounts than in Providence city-wide. Note that over half of the children of Olneyville live in households below the poverty line (53.9%). Although unemployment rates have been decreasing over the past ten years (the percent change of unemployment

rates in Olneyville is -38.0%), unemployment rates are higher in Olneyville (11.3%) than in the rest of the city (9.2%) and the unemployment rate of Olneyville is double the national unemployment rate of 5.6%⁹.

In addition, vacancy rates have grown, again by higher amounts than the rest of Providence- 19.9% of the total housing units in Olneyville are vacant, while 11.8% of the total vacant housing units in the rest of Providence are vacant. Further, the number of people who have lived in Olneyville for less than a year has increased drastically between 1980 and 1990- more drastically than the rest of Providence, while the number of people who have lived in the neighborhood longer than six years has decreased dramatically- again, more dramatically than the rest of Providence. According to the demographics, there has been an increase of 14.7% (between 1980 and 1990) of people living in Olneyville for less than a year while, in the rest of Providence, there has only been a 0.4% increase in the number of people living in Providence for less than one year. Further, there has been a 60.8% drop in the number of people who have lived in Olneyville for 6 to 10 years and a 19.1% drop in the number of people living the neighborhood for 11 to 20 years. In the rest of Providence, there has been a 10.6% increase in the number of people who moved to Providence 6 to 10 years ago, and a 6.3% drop in the number of people who moved to Providence 11 to 20 years ago.

The number of owner occupied housing stock has decreased between 1980 and 1990 (by 22.2%), while the number of renter occupied housing stock has increased greatly (by 153.7%)- again these trends are more pronounced in

⁹ *The Providence Journal-Bulletin*, "US Jobless Rate Steady in December" 20 January 1996.

Olneyville than in greater Providence (which experienced a 2.3% drop in the number of owner occupied housing units and a 80.7% increase in the number of renter occupied housing units). Further, according to chart 1, there are 8 to 14 violent crimes in Olneyville per 1,000 residents- numbers which are lower than areas like Downtown and Upper South Providence, but comparable to places like Smith Hill, Federal Hill, West End, Reservoir, Elmwood, and Lower South Providence. Further, these numbers are still lower than areas like College Hill, Mount Hope, and Blackstone.

These demographics paint a general picture of Olneyville- that the racial/ethnic background of its residents is changing dramatically, that it is faced with some tough poverty and unemployment issues, that there is notable violent crime occurring in the neighborhood, and that it is a highly transient population.

A drive through Olneyville will reveal homes that have seen better days or are completely boarded up; looming, abandoned mills; and commercial area which houses a lot of wholesale jewelers and empty shops. A particular eyesore in downtown Olneyville is the abandoned Almacs site, located in the heart of Olneyville Square. The supermarket closed its doors in January of 1994, leaving many area residents without a local grocer and forced to take a 30 minute bus ride to a Stop and Shop located further up on Manton Avenue. Because it sits abandoned in the heart of the commercial district of Olneyville, the site represents to many the dilapidation of the neighborhood, home to vandalism and acting as a mere shortcut for cars driving through Olneyville Square.

Downtown Olneyville therefore does not present a lot of options for the average consumer. Debbie Courtmanche, a local resident of Olneyville, offers her opinion of her downtown area

What's down here?...There's nothing there- there's no shopping centers, there's no nothing. There's really nothing to go to Olneyville for, except to the New York System for a decent weenie. You know, when you stop and think about it, there's nothing there.¹⁰

According to Keith Ryan, a community organizer in Olneyville for the Neighborhood Empowerment for Prevention Project (NEPP, a project which is discussed later), the image of Olneyville is one of a community, "whose healthy days have gone and its just a haven for drug dealers and it is not even safe to drive through here in the middle of the day- 'you can't go through Olneyville.'"¹¹ Even when I would tell my fellow classmates that I was doing my thesis on a project in Olneyville, many of them looked aghast and asked apprehensively, "Gee, do you have to go there a lot? Isn't it unsafe?" Further, even the people of Olneyville have a onerous reputation. According to Kathy Hackett, who grew up around Olneyville and is now the coordinator of a Department of Education program in Olneyville

I went out to dinner with some friends...and they were talking. And something came up, oh, they were talking about a woman who had come into, I don't know, another snazzy restaurant and bought a lunch, ordered a drink, and was sitting there. And I said, 'Gee, what did she look like?' And somebody said, 'Lower Olneyville.' And everyone at the table broke into hysterical laughter. They knew exactly what was meant. Some floozy, poorly dressed, uneducated.¹²

¹⁰ Debbie Courtmanche, telephone interview, 23 March 1996.

¹¹ Keith Ryan, telephone interview, 15 February 1996.

¹² Kathy Hackett, telephone interview, 1 March 1996.

Who and What is Trying to Address These Problems?

Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets argues that an assessment of a community should not solely be based upon its problems. The work that is currently being done by organizations and individuals should be counted and considered the assets of a community. It argues that this type of work should be highlighted and applauded in addition to recognizing the problems of a community- this type of balanced perspective leads to a more comprehensive assessment of a community.¹³

Therefore, I feel that it is also appropriate to include the work in Olneyville that is aimed at improving the problems of the neighborhood. While there are many problems in Olneyville, contrary to wider opinion, there are programs and people who are trying to address these issues. When I began researching the WRGP and Olneyville, I, like many people in Providence and at Brown, felt that the lower income social service/ community organization hub of Providence was located in South Providence and Elmwood. As I began to research Olneyville, however, I began to discover that Olneyville does have some notable programs that are trying to ameliorate the neighborhood. As I talked to one agency about its programs, I would find out about the work of other agencies, and slowly I began to piece together evidence of a revitalization effort in Olneyville.

Joe Testa, the director of the Nickerson House Community Center, was particularly adamant about the increased recognition this work in Olneyville deserves:

I think they (outsiders) are ignorant of what goes on down here. They probably have no idea of what goes on in Olneyville. They say that (the community is a mess) because that's what they read in the papers- they read that somebody gets busted for drugs down here 4 o'clock in the morning. But the odds are that person is not from Olneyville, and if you're in Olneyville at 4 o'clock in the morning, what the Hell are you doing down here? They should see what goes on here between 8 o'clock in the morning and 8 o'clock at night. This is a very vibrant, hard working community. There's a lot of good people down here, you know? I laugh when I hear these things being said because it just shows me how ignorant people are of what goes on in these neighborhoods, you know?....People need to educate themselves.¹⁴

So the following, which is by no means an exhaustive survey, represents my attempt to breakdown the ignorance about the positive aspects of Olneyville. This assessment is based upon articles in *The Providence Journal-Bulletin*, phone interviews with residents and community leaders, and community meetings.

¹³ John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight, Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets 1993.

¹⁴ Joe Testa, telephone interview, 4 March 1996.

The Olneyville Housing Corporation was established in 1989 and started as a program of the Nickerson House Community Center. Its mission is to “promote the revitalization of Olneyville as well as to foster a sense of community through the provision of and advocacy for decent and affordable housing.¹⁵” It fulfills this mission by providing the following services: housing development, whereby homes are constructed or rehabilitated; assisting Olneyville homeowners to select contractors; marketing homes to potential homeowners; providing housing court assistance; offering referral services matching landlords and tenants; and publicizing such services to prospective and current homeowners in Olneyville. The organization provides home ownership opportunities to an average of five families a year¹⁶. When I was interviewing the various community leaders of Olneyville, most of these leaders made a particular mention of the work the Olneyville Housing Corporation is doing, commending the work the group has been doing.

The Rhode Island Organizing Project is a church-based organizing effort. As of 1993, the group had a chapter cluster that included both Mount Pleasant and Olneyville. In early 1995, the group decided to pay more specific attention to Olneyville and started a separate Olneyville chapter. Three churches in Olneyville sponsor the group: St. Theresa’s, Church of the Messiah, and Maranatha Church of God. The group has a core membership that varies from 20-40 people. They are the only advocacy group working for Olneyville.

¹⁵ Olneyville Housing Corporation, promotional brochure.

¹⁶ Alice Engram-Hammed, telephone interview, 13 February 1996.

Although they have been concentrating on Olneyville for only a little over a year, they have organized for issues such as getting more street lighting in the neighborhood, going after absentee landowners and holding them accountable for a code enforcement, working with the community police, and facilitating enterprise in Olneyville- particularly assisting, Grubber Rubber, a worker-owned recycling business.

Another of their projects has been to develop alternatives for the abandoned Almacs site. They have been active in researching and soliciting other supermarket chains to locate there and have been looking into the idea of a farmer's market at the site. One campaign that has received particular attention has been the campaign to stop a liquor store from locating on Manton Avenue. Since August of 1995, local residents, social service agencies, and RIOP have organized to prevent the location of a liquor store at a commercial complex on Manton Avenue. These organizers have complained that the neighborhood does not need another liquor store because there are already three liquor stores within a mile of the proposed store¹⁷. Further, the proposed store would be placed in a complex that includes a gas station and may therefore facilitate instances of drinking and driving. In addition, the fact that the owners of this proposed liquor store were granted a HUD (Department of Housing and Urban Development) Community Development Block Grant of \$125,000 further incites the opponents of the liquor store (the owners' grant application did not specify that this would be a liquor store). Despite these protesters' efforts, the store was granted a liquor

¹⁷ Thomas J. Morgan, "Let There be Light, But no Liquor Outlet" *The Providence Journal-Bulletin*, 23 August 1995.

license in late August of 1995 by the city Board of Licenses. The debate over HUD's role in the grant of the CDBG to the liquor store continues, however, and a letter of protest was sent by RIOP to the Boston HUD office in December.

Another campaign that RIOP is involved in is the federal Enterprise Community grant. Under this federal grant, cities develop their own strategies to increase economic growth- the underlying theory of this grant is that cities, and not the federal government, know best how to allocate money for the economic improvement of cities. In June of 1994, the Providence Plan submitted an application for the designation of Olneyville, South Providence, Elmwood, West End, and parts of Federal Hill as enterprise communities. The Providence Plan was awarded a \$3 million grant in January of 1995, money that is allocated for jobs, job training, and loans.

However, while Olneyville is designated as an enterprise community, it is actually not a direct recipient of any of the federal funding of the grant. The application included the demographics of Olneyville to make the need of this money in Providence more pronounced, but there is no mention of Olneyville in the actual money allocation strategies- none of the lead entities channeling the funds of the grant are based in Olneyville, while other communities like South Providence and Elmwood are represented. In addition, local community groups, RIOP included, have protested the fact that they were not included the Providence Plan's planning sessions that decided how the money would be allocated in the grant.

Although RIOP's membership primarily comes from the churches of Olneyville and not the wider population of the neighborhood, they still have the distinction as being the only advocacy group in Olneyville, and are the only resident-based group that is challenging bureaucratic forces outside of Olneyville *for* Olneyville. This group at least provides a mechanism for some residents to address the different issues of importance to Olneyville.

This area also does not lack community centers. Currently there is the Nickerson House Community Center, Joslin Multiservice Community Center, Manton Heights Community Center, and Hartford Park Community Center. These agencies provide a wide range of services to all ages of the community- from after-school programs to homework help to daycare to adult literacy and parenting programs to housing and job fairs, and senior citizen services. In addition, they all also provide crisis intervention services, providing families in emergency situations with welfare, housing, employment, mental health and medical care assistance, as well as food, clothing, and furniture. The Manton Heights and Hartford Park Community Centers are located in the two housing projects of Olneyville of the same name (and are administered by the Providence Housing Authority). Because they are located within the same complexes as the residential units, these community centers are highly utilized by these residents.

All of these community centers' services to a diverse age population makes these community centers the place of convergence for many in the neighborhood- places where they can meet their neighbors. This type of support

(particularly the day care programs) is provided by no one else in the community, and therefore these community centers have become integral service providers to Olneyville.

The Neighborhood Empowerment for Prevention Program (NEPP) is based on the premise that a clean, employed, educated neighborhood leads to a neighborhood that does not abuse substances. The program is sponsored by the Mayor's Council on Drug and Alcohol Abuse and sends 15 community organizers to the 25 neighborhoods of Providence. Keith Ryan, an organizer in Olneyville, organizes a community membership in Olneyville to sponsor projects. Some of these projects have included sponsoring a Unity Night in which social service agencies had booths to showcase their services to residents, helping the residents of Steuben Street get trees and lighting for their street, organizing clean ups and anti graffiti patrols, and sponsoring a youth anti-violence day at Perry Middle School, in which students heard from speakers who were formally in gangs and where students were able to participate in various workshops about subjects like teen pregnancy, date rape, substance abuse, community policing, the Holocaust, and alternative dispute resolutions (a interesting side note- the normal absentee figure for Perry Middle School is 150 students per day. On the day of this program, only 12 students were absent).¹⁸

The Olneyville Boys and Girls Club provides recreational activities (swimming, basketball, cooking classes, field trips, movies) as well as

educational opportunities (homework help and the Academic Reinforcement Power Hour- a mini class on academic subjects like math or geography) to the children of Olneyville. The Crime Watch group meets monthly to talk about crime concerns in the neighborhood, and collaborates with the community police to address such issues. They have been effective in channeling residents' complaints about their neighbors or about local criminal activity to city authorities. One of their recent victories has been to stop one of the Crime Watch member's neighbor from leaking motor oil into that member's yard.¹⁹ The members of the Crime Watch group are thus particularly motivated to see change happen in their neighborhoods and are willing to challenge their neighbors and seek appropriate assistance from the authorities. Rose Damiano, a local member of the Crime Watch group, states

When you live in a place like this and you have children I wouldn't feel right about complaining about any of this if I wasn't out there trying to make anything better.²⁰

In addition, there are the schools of the Olneyville area. Two in particular- the William D'Abate School and the Oliver Hazard Perry Middle School- make a particular effort to *reach out* into the community. With a staff of volunteer parents, the school runs an active home visit program, having parents visit other parents and talk about whatever concerns they are having with their children. In addition, the school also works with twenty Latino families who have children in

¹⁸ Ryan.

¹⁹ Rose Damiano, telephone interview, 7 March 1996.

²⁰ Damiano.

the sixth grade. These families have agreed to let the school follow their family for the next three years and help the family with tutoring, mentoring, and the general educational progress of the child. In addition, the Perry Middle School, because it serves the children of both Hartford Park and Manton Heights Public Housing Projects, feels an especial need to address the social concerns of these children. It therefore collaborates with the Providence Housing Authority to identify services which can be developed for these students.²¹

The William D'Abate School also makes a conscientious effort not to limit the range of its services to the school building. The phrase raised upon the outside of its building reads, "It takes a village to raise a child," emphasizes the school's philosophy that a healthy child needs a healthy family and a healthy neighborhood. This philosophy is largely realized through the school's Child Opportunity Zone (COZ). A State Department of Education concept that began in 1992, the COZ's are intended to provide services to families and coordinate existing services in a community, with the hope that such services improve the educational potentials of a child. There are 24 COZ's in Rhode Island, and the William D'Abate COZ was one of the first ones running in the state and serves as the model for the other Providence COZ's. The Olneyville COZ provides parent workshops (with such topics as to how to motivate children, preparing a child for kindergarten, stress management, and conflict resolution), adult literacy programs (including ESL and GED preparation), and crisis intervention services.

One of the most effective programs of the COZ is the monthly meeting they host called "the breakfast club." At this meeting, the various Olneyville

²¹ COZ meeting, 14 February 1996.

groups come together, share news of their respective organizations, and look for points of collaboration. With updates on services, participating organizations learn of new services of other groups to refer their members to. If one organization is working on an upcoming event, other groups identify ways to support the project. Keith Ryan states,

(Before) I think there wasn't enough collaboration among the various community groups and services that were available. You mentioned the community centers...we have a strong housing corporation. We have a strong crime watch. I don't think that all the time all of those groups worked together the strongest. I don't think that all the time they combined their strengths to form one very loud voice...They are working better now. I think what you saw yesterday at the that meeting (the Breakfast Club meeting) was very impressive...I think it shows you that there really is an ability to work together and not only that, but that people are willing.²²

While these community projects and programs may seem slim compared to the activity in other areas, the existence of such work proves that some people in Olneyville are working to change the community. By providing real services to the community of Olneyville and by advocating for change within the neighborhood, these groups are working to improve the quality of life in Olneyville concretely and creatively and to make it a more attractive place to live and work.

Conclusion

²² Ryan.

While there are groups in the neighborhood trying to address these problems, there is still room for much improvement in Olneyville. The WRGP therefore represents one more project that is attempting to revitalize Olneyville, a community which is home to high poverty, unemployment, crime, and transience.

Chapter 3:

The Barriers to Active Community Support for the Woonasquatucket River Greenway Project

The Providence Plan, in addition to expecting the WRGP to act as a catalyst for recreational opportunities and environmental quality improvement in Olneyville, also wants the WRGP to serve as a catalyst for community organization in Olneyville. During the announcement of this project in January of 1994, the WRGP was declared to be the following

It's really a grassroots project to get the community involved in preserving the river, providing access to (it), and turning it into a resource for the communities it flows through.¹

Further, the Action Plan for the WRGP, derived in 1994 by the Providence Plan and the Trust for Public Land, states, "The goal (of the WRGP) is to give the surrounding communities ownership of the greenway."²

By calling the WRGP a grassroots effort and one which the community will hopefully one day own, the groups leading the WRGP want the residents along the river to take an active part in the development of the greenway; these project leaders want, "to get the community *involved* in preserving the river..." They

¹ Doug Evans, quoted in Ken Minigis, "Grassroots Project Aims to Transform Riverfront," *The Providence Journal-Bulletin*, 24 January 1994.

² The Providence Plan and the Trust for Public Land, Action Plan, 1994.

want the community to take an active part in the planning, construction, and maintenance of the greenway. The *Providence Journal-Bulletin* portrays the Providence Plan as being convinced this will happen.

Sherman and Ayala say they firmly believe that enough of the Woonasquatucket's neighbors can be hooked on its beauty to make the reclamation a success. (with community participation)

"One way or another, we're going to get them," Ayala said.

"Once people get to know the river, they will fall in love with it" she said.³

Even though the community did not initiate this project, the project leaders want residents to take an active leadership role in the development and maintenance of an urban greenspace project, like the role the residents living around Sauer Park and Meridian Hill Park took with their projects. According to their rhetoric, the leaders of the WRGP expect this project not only to be "a resource for the communities it flows through," but also to be a point of community organization.

The Providence Plan's Strategies to Gain Community Support for the WRGP

Therefore, the Providence Plan, as the primary caretakers of this project, has the task of convincing the people of Olneyville that this project is worth their active participation. The Providence Plan hopes that the following strategies will

orient Olneyville residents to the project and provide the incentive necessary for these residents to participate actively in the project.

Strategy 1: Move the WRGP at a slow pace

The Providence Plan wants to make sure that these residents understand what is going on with the project and that they can participate in the planning and development of the greenway. However, involving the community forces the project to move much more slowly than if the Providence Plan planned and developed the entire project themselves. By moving slowly, the Providence Plan feels that it gives more people a chance to be involved in the process. In addition, if the project moved at a fast pace, community members would be more inclined to feel left out since they would not have been able to devote the amount of energy (from their working and family schedules) needed to keep up with accelerated developments of the project. The Providence Plan feels that by moving slowly, residents feel more comfortable with the project and feel that it is open to their participation.

Strategy 2: Provide opportunities for education about the Woonasquatucket River Greenway Project and for input about the design of the WRGP

The second strategy has been either to hold or go to community meetings and educate community members about the Woonasquatucket River, the

³ Gina Macris, "The Hidden River," *The Providence Journal-Bulletin*, 24 October 1995.

greenway project, and to get their input about the design of the greenway. For the first two years of the WRGP, the Providence Plan has been focusing on the education aspect, holding meetings in Joslin Multiservice Community House, Nickerson House, Manton Heights and Hartford Park Housing Developments, and with the Rhode Island Organizing Project. They have also had a display about the river and greenway project at the Olneyville branch of the Providence Public Library and print a widely distributed newsletter, *Woonasquatucket River News*, about the project. In addition, area schools like the William D'Abate School and Oliver Hazard Perry Middle School have developed programs to teach their students about the river.

Now the Providence Plan has begun phase two, in which meetings are held to encourage community residents to participate in the design of the greenway. At these meetings, Jane Sherman and Arlene Ayala show a slide show of the river and try to get some people to remember what the river used to be like when they were young. This is the interactive education part of the greenway project- getting people to share stories, histories, about the river with each other. From there, two representatives from the volunteer design team take over the presentation, showing slides of what communities have done with other greenway/park projects, and facilitating a discussion with the attendees about what would work along the river. At meetings where there are Spanish speaking attendees, Ms. Ayala translates.

The Providence Plan hopes that such meetings provide residents along the river with information about the Woonasquatucket River and the greenway

project, engage them in the planning process, give them an opportunity to interact with the staff of the Providence Plan and design team, as well as offer them a time to get together with their fellow neighbors.

Strategy 3: Plan events that get the community to the river, trigger thinking about the greenway project, and that demonstrate that the greenway can become a reality

The Providence Plan realizes that events work well to gather interest about the larger effort. The largest of these events has been the annual Woonasquatucket River Greenway Festival, and it has been regarded as the project's highlight for the past two years. The June festival includes canoe rides down the river, information booths of Coalition members, a children's activities area, opportunities for attendees to illustrate their vision of the greenway project, food, pony rides, and performers.

The Providence Plan believes that clean up events (whose past partners have been City Year and Brown University) are particularly effective because they allow the residents of the community the chance to support the greenway physically. As opposed to participating in the planning and design of the greenway, a type of support which takes years to produce results, these events allow residents to see that the greenway project is making physical progress and to see that *they* are making a direct, immediate contribution.

In addition, the Providence Plan has also held river tours, river workshops, and boat rides along the Woonasquatucket. The Providence Plan feels that

these type of events get people looking at and experiencing the river and trigger thoughts and ideas about what they would want the proposed greenway to look like. The Providence Plan hopes that with time, all of these events, particularly the festival, will become more institutionalized in the community's social agenda.

What are the barriers to gaining active community support for the WRGP?

As I have shown, the communities of Sauer Park and Meridian Hill Park *actively* support their greenspace project- they were the ones who derived a strategy for getting this greenspace, they were the ones who solicited funding sources for their projects, they are the ones who develop the programs needed to get people excited about the parks, and they are the ones who primarily maintain the greenspace. However, Sauer Park and Meridian Hill Park have active community support because of the simple fact that it was the community who initiated the projects- it was *their* idea, so they would naturally do whatever they could to support *their* idea.

Achieving active community support and community ownership for the Woonasquatucket River Greenway Project will be particularly difficult because this project was not community initiated. The idea of having a greenway along the Woonasquatucket River had its origin not from the community members living around the river, but from outsiders- from Ken Payne, the National Park Service,

the Trust for Public Land and the Providence Plan. Active community support is questionable for the WRGP for the following reasons.

1. The facilitator of the project, the Providence Plan, has little credibility in the community.

The Providence Plan is an outsider to a place like Olneyville. They do not have a previous history of community-based work in Olneyville and are therefore recognized as foreigners to the community. The Providence Plan was established by the City and State, which inherently places the group at a certain “non-community” status. They are a young organization and thus the full extent of the local community ties that they may eventually have are not yet fully manifested. Further, the Providence Plan already has generated some skepticism in the community. The following is one woman’s perception of the Providence Plan and how she feels the Providence Plan is dealing with the WRGP. She has lived in Olneyville for 15 years and is an ESL tutor in the neighborhood.

I lost a lot of respect. They do this the way they do everything else, you know, a bureaucracy does everything else. Throw a lot of money at it and they don’t address the problem, you know? All kinds of bureaucracy approaches problems the same way. They don’t really address the problem.⁴

Further, since the Providence Plan has no particular affinity with Olneyville residents, residents have no obligation to support the greenway project. If residents of Olneyville had started this project, like Sauer Park and Meridian Hill Park, other community members might have been more inclined to support the project because they feel an affinity with and the need to support their neighbors.

2. The WRGP needs to compete for attention in Olneyville with other social issues

The Providence Plan is asking for the residents of Olneyville to participate in the planning, development, and maintenance of the WRGP. However, such a request must compete with the daily demands on these residents to provide themselves and their families with food, shelter, and medical attention. While a greenway may offer residents some personal solace with its natural beauty and some recreational opportunities, such benefits may not seem immediate to a resident who is struggling to meet the basic necessities of life. According to Duane Clinker, of the Rhode Island Organizing Project

...they (the Providence Plan) have to understand that what people may have to organize around first is crime, or they may have to organize around housing, or may have to organize around twelve other issues, before they can really devote attention to the greenway.⁵

Joe Testa of the Nickerson House further states

I don't think the community is going to care much about the greenway. It's not a high priority. These people here, single parents, two or three kids, they come here to pick up their kids at five, five-thirty at night and they just want to go home, to take care of their kids and go home. The greenway is not going to mean much to them, they're worrying about whether they're going to eat the next day.⁶

Eventual community ownership of the WRGP is dubious because the Providence Plan has no credibility in the community and because the WRGP has

⁴ Anonymous.

⁵ Duane Clinker, telephone interview, 5 February 1996.

⁶ Joe Testa, telephone interview, 4 March 1996.

to compete for attention amid other social issues. This is not to say that the people of a lower income urban neighborhood will never take the time out to support a greenspace project actively- as the other case studies demonstrate, urban greenspace can become a priority in lives of people living in these communities. However, because this greenway project was not initiated by the residents of Olneyville, it is a project that addresses issues that the community did not think, on their own, were salient enough to become a priority in their lives.

Residents around Sauer Park and Meridian Hill Park made a conscious choice to make urban greenspace a priority in their lives. They made the conscious choice to rehabilitate greenspace, to do something to address an eyesore and a crime mecca in their neighborhoods. However, the residents of Olneyville did not make that conscious choice to address the Woonasquatucket River- the crime and vandalism along the Woonasquatucket River and the lack of recreational opportunities in the neighborhood was never such an issue to the residents of Olneyville that they felt compelled to start a greenway project themselves.

Further, there are no community groups in Olneyville that have an environmental agenda, much less a greenspace agenda- residents never before thought that this was a priority issue. In addition, because there are no groups with an environmental agenda in Olneyville, there is no Olneyville agency that can become an active partner with the Providence Plan with this project.

The WRGP could have been a more obvious priority to residents if the *other residents* had made the conscious choice to make it one. Right now, it is

just the Providence Plan asking them for that commitment. However, without that initial interest and commitment, that initial willingness to make this issue a priority, active community support becomes much more difficult.

While the Providence Plan does have strategies to gain active community support, the barriers outlined above seem to be preventing people in Olneyville from actively participating in the WRGP. The attendance at their community meetings, river tours, and clean ups range from as many as 25 people, to as little as 5 people. According to the 1990 census, there are almost 6,000 people in living in Providence, therefore the people of Olneyville are not banging down the Providence Plan's door with excitement over this project, and this is not, as previously claimed, "a grassroots project". Further, no group of residents have banded together in support of this project, wanting to accept some responsibility of the WRGP now carried primarily by the Providence Plan. No group like the Friends of Sauer Park or Friends of Meridian Hill Park has emerged- no Friends of the Woonasquatucket River Greenway group has surfaced.

Further, even if the Providence Plan took a more regional approach to this project and tried to get other communities, like Manton, Hartford, Valley, Smith Hill, and Downtown, involved in the development of the WRGP, I expect that they would encounter the same barriers in these other communities. It will be extremely difficult for the Providence Plan to escape the image of an agency started by the City and State with little community-level credibility; and this

project, because it is not started from the community level, will still have to *compete* for attention from other social issues. While the Providence Plan may have an easier time in getting a higher income community to support this project because the residents of these neighborhoods will not have as salient economic problems as the residents of Olneyville have competing for their attention, the Providence Plan will encounter similar barriers. The Providence Plan will still have the onerous task of convincing people that an issue- that they have not identified before as an issue- should be such a priority in their lives that they should devote time and energy to the issue. These types of barriers to gaining active community support and leadership for this project will be encountered anywhere.

According to Jane Sherman, the development of the WRGP is “a community led process⁷.” However, the numbers of people that are attending the events they hold are modest and the community certainly has not taken the lead in planning the development of the project. While some residents are participating in the design process of the greenway, residents are in no way “leading” this process. Residents are not sitting at the strategy table with the Providence Plan, planning out the project’s next step. Residents are not working with the Providence Plan to develop funding sources for the WRGP. Residents are not going around the community educating their neighbors about this project. Residents have not made a commitment to maintain the greenway. While this strategizing, this quest for funding sources, this publicity, and this commitment to

maintenance are all the types of active community support that Sauer Park and Meridian Hill Park generated, this is not what is happening for the WRGP.

Conclusion

According to the rhetoric of the leaders of the WRGP, the WRGP is a community-led project. However, active community support has not occurred for the WRGP, nor cannot it be confidently expected to occur. Such active community support is questionable because the facilitators of this project have little credibility in the community and because residents did not initially identify the need for this project

⁷ Jane Sherman, personal interview, 21 February 1996.

Chapter 4:

Recommendations

According to their rhetoric, the Providence Plan sincerely want the community of Olneyville to be leaders in this project and to own the project with them. However, they have not been able to acquire this type of partnership commitment from the community and whether or not they will ever be able to is questionable. Therefore, the expectations behind the rhetoric of the leaders of the WRGP are unrealistic. Because active community support is dubious for the WRGP, the Providence Plan should take into consideration the following recommendations.

1. The WRGP should not be called a grassroots project

A lot of the descriptors the Providence Plan is using for this project- “community led,” “we’re going to get them,” and “grassroots,” -indicate that the Providence Plan assumes that this is a project the residents of Olneyville will actively support. However, as I have shown, such labels are not appropriate for the WRGP. Further, in the end, this “grassroots” designation may actually end up hurting the residents of Olneyville. Many City and State agencies and non-profit groups are watching this project. If the Providence Plan keeps claiming

that this is a grassroots project, and that type of support never surfaces, which is, as argued before, likely to happen. This lack of active support may well be seen as a failure of the people of Olneyville and of the Providence Plan.

Outsiders are likely to say, "The residents of Olneyville have not taken ownership over this project. The Providence Plan has failed to raise this support. Further, the people of Olneyville do not care about anything. It's therefore not worth our time to pump anymore energy to revitalize that neighborhood- the residents there are so apathetic." By making so bold, and so publicized, declarations that this is a grassroots project when it is not and probably will not be, the Providence Plan are running the risk of hurting themselves and the people of Olneyville in the end.

Perhaps, one day, the community will become excited about the project and will be willing to make a concrete commitment of active community support to this project. However, there are a lot of reasons why they will not commit, and they have not yet committed, so until the day Olneyville residents demonstrate that commitment, the Providence Plan needs to stop labeling this project as something that is grassroots and community led.

The staff at the Providence Plan needs to be realistic about how much community support this project can garner and what kind of support this will be. However, the Providence Plan should take solace that some people are actually coming to their community meetings and events. Yet, attendance is a form of passive support- some people are *coming* to the events, but no one has *taken*

leadership in these events, and the Providence Plan should not be surprised if no one ever demonstrates this leadership. The Providence Plan needs to realize what type of support these events can be expected to cultivate- passive, not active support.

2. Continue community involvement strategies

Because this project is not a grassroots project does not mean that the Providence Plan should stop trying to get the community involved in the WRGP. Community involvement in a project does not necessarily have to be on the grassroots leadership level. The passive support that this project can generate is valuable and should be allowed to grow.

Strategically, the Providence Plan should not change what they are doing-arranging events to celebrate and clean the river and scheduling community meetings to educate people about the project and to get their design input. These tactics *are* needed to let people know what is going on with the project. Events like the river tours and festivals are good recreational activities for the residents of Olneyville, and the design community meetings are important to ensure the WRGP will have a design that will be appropriate to the community. Residents should know that this project is happening in their neighborhood. These events educate people about the project and offer some recreational opportunities to the residents of Olneyville. Further, these strategies are

important to show people outside of the project, such as potential funders, that the Providence Plan is trying to get the community involved.

Further, while the active support projects like Sauer Park and Meridian Hill Park generated will probably not happen for the WRGP, this does not mean that the people of Olneyville will not use the greenway as a resource. This greenway will increase the number of recreational opportunities in the neighborhood, make the neighborhood look better, possibly attract more business and residents to Olneyville, and the greenway will probably be used because the Providence Plan has received some community design input for the project.

It can therefore be expected that residents will extract benefit from the greenway, but, as I have argued before, it is not too reasonable to expect the residents of Olneyville to contribute, *to give something*, to the development of this project. It is one thing to plant a resource in a community to further the community's improvement, it is an entirely another thing to ask a community to be active in the development of this resource. This greenway project therefore only has merit as a resource and as a source of passive support for the community.

3. Get other residential communities involved

As demonstrated before, this inability to get the community of Olneyville to take a leadership role suggests that efforts to solicit leadership from other communities like Manton, Hartford, Valley, and Smith Hill also are unlikely to

succeed. However, the Providence Plan has made very little effort to get these other communities involved- the Providence Plan is primarily trying to gain the community support of Olneyville. All of the community meetings and events have been based in Olneyville locations, and there are no representation of these other neighborhoods in the Woonasquatucket River Coalition.

Greater awareness of this project is needed in these other communities. The residents in these neighborhoods should be made aware of this project and be given the opportunities that Olneyville has to support this project (albeit passively). Again, while active community support from these neighborhoods may not be forthcoming, the Providence Plan should be increasing awareness of the project to these to other communities through community meetings and inviting residents to explore the river in their neighborhoods. This type of support, particularly if it is in the form of design input, will increase the likelihood that the greenway will become a resource for these communities. While the role these communities will play will likely to be limited, the ability to play this role is currently *not even open* to all communities. Therefore, while the Providence Plan should expect that the WRGP will generate limited community participation, they should nevertheless try to *expand the base* of community participation for the project.

4. Try to develop community support that is not necessarily residentially based

The Providence Plan has focused primarily gaining residential community support for the WRGP. While such efforts to involve the residential community is critical for the WRGP, as I have shown, the degree of community support this project can garner is questionable. The Providence Plan should therefore look to expand its definition of “community.”

According to the original proposals for the WRGP, the greenway is supposed to be a regional resource. However, as of now, only the community of Olneyville has been actively solicited about the project. Because there are limitations to the amount of support these residential communities can offer the WRGP, the Providence Plan should broaden its target audience and begin to look to other groups for support.

The Providence Plan needs to define who will use this greenway. While adjacent residential communities will probably use the greenway, it should be acknowledged that others who are not from these neighborhoods may come to use the greenway. These other potential users of the greenway also need to be solicited for support.

For example, biking, canoeing, and hiking organizations in Rhode Island and southern Massachusetts should be made aware of this project and invited to participate in the design, construction, and maintenance of the greenway. As recreational groups, they would be likely to have a vested interest in the greenway project. Further, such interest groups would *already be organized*, therefore supporting the WRGP could just be added to the groups’ activities (as opposed to trying to organize an unorganized residential community). Therefore,

active support may be garnered from the community of recreational organizations in the area.

5. Continue efforts to gain the participation of environmental groups

The Providence Plan should also continue its efforts to get other environmental groups involved. As of now, the support from groups like the Audubon Society and Save the Bay has been minimal. Partnerships with environmental groups would increase the environmental input this project needs (environmental input that the Providence Plan has limited capability to provide) and would increase the credibility of the project.

Conclusions

In summary, I believe that community involvement and education efforts should be continued, but expectations of community support should be lowered, and the “grassroots” designation of this project should be dropped. The rhetoric of this project needs to change, as well as the expectations for community support this rhetoric espouses. The base of support for this project should be expanded and residents of Olneyville should not be considered the only users of and only source of support for the WRGP. While their support can only be expected to be passive, the other communities along the greenway route should receive more education about the WRGP. Further, the efforts of the Providence Plan should not be limited to residents along the greenway route. Recreational

interest groups should be encouraged to support the greenway project- these groups may act as the active supporters and leaders for the WRGP. In addition, efforts to solicit support from environmental groups should be continued.

Conclusions

I think that groups like the Providence Plan need to be cautious about projects they initiate to revitalize communities like Olneyville. They need to be careful how they frame these projects and how they anticipate the communities will respond to such projects. While it may be politically correct to call a project “grassroots” or “community-led,” external organizers need to be honest and evaluate whether such a project is really or ever can be “grassroots” or “community-led” before they attach such identifications to a project. While having a grassroots or community led project would be ideal, there are times, as this thesis demonstrates, when such aspirations are not realistic. This story of the WRGP shows that an outsider like the Providence Plan is highly unlikely to ever start a “grassroots” project.

This is of course not to say that because this project is not a grassroots project that it has no merit. The WRGP may have merit to the Olneyville community, in terms of recreational, environmental, and aesthetic benefits, but the *limits* of these benefits needs to be acknowledged- the WRGP *is very unlikely to* cause the mobilization of the community of Olneyville. While the founders of this project should be commended for initiating this project in a community like Olneyville and they should be commended for really trying to make concrete progress in the revitalization of this neighborhood, they need to be realistic about how much change and impact they will have with the WRGP.

When I started researching this project, I thought I would find some way to help the project move along, identify a way I could help the WRGP build community support. I never thought that, in the end, I would deeply question the amount of community support this project can generate. However, I arrived at such a conclusion by being honest, and not getting caught up in aspirations and ideals for this project. I hope that with this thesis I can persuade groups, like the Providence Plan and other outsider groups starting projects like the Woonasquatucket River Greenway Project, to be equally honest and realistic.

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