

## **Senate Community Relations Committee meeting**

**11:30 – 2:00 p.m.**

**Uptown Partners**

**April 15, 2014**

**Attendees:** Marissa Arlet, IRCCO; Lachelle Binion, OTMA; Laurie Cohen, ULS, CRC Co-Chair; ULS; Linda Hartman, HSL; Holly Hickling, Honors College; Lovie Jackson Foster, Social Work, CRC Co-Chair; Andrea Kriska, GSPH; Kannu Sahni, Community Relations; Mary Ellen Solomon, Director of Governmental Affairs, Duquesne University; Tracy Soska, Social Work; Paul Supowitz, Community and Governmental Relations; Pamela Toto, SHRS; John Wilds, Community Relations; Mary D. Williams, OBID

This was our committee's annual field trip, and we traveled to Uptown, where we met with Jeanne McNutt, Siena Kane, and Dale McNutt. Jeanne is the Executive Director of Uptown Partners, Dale is the Founder and President of the Board of StartUptown, and Siena is a Pitt Social Work graduate who currently serves as the Program Coordinator for Uptown Partners.

Uptown is a twelve block area surrounding Fifth Avenue between Oakland and Downtown, adjacent to Duquesne University and Mercy Hospital. Both StartUptown and Uptown Partners are located in a Keystone Innovation Zone. According to the URA, "the Pittsburgh Keystone Innovation Zone received funding to support companies within the zone. The zone includes the many colleges and universities throughout the city, which act as hubs for business growth. These hubs provide access to innovation, technology and economic companies that not only spur development, but offer financial support as well."

StartUptown began seven years ago as a co-op space, and was one of the first Maker Spaces in Pittsburgh. It offers incubator space for startup companies. Twenty-nine companies use the location for their businesses currently. These are early-stage businesses, where light mentoring takes place. There are generally between eight and ten interns during the summer, including Pitt engineering students. Twenty-five thousand dollars is available in grant money from the Pittsburgh Central Keystone Innovation Zone for tech startups, and each year, as many as four companies have received these grants.

The general goal of StartUptown is to change the consciousness of the community by putting entrepreneurs into the mix, to create a community of innovation and entrepreneurial spirit. Because they are located in a food desert, some of the companies located there deal with food issues. One of the innovators is Mary Beth Wilson, who won a National Science Foundation grant to launch her company, Innovesca. She adds ingredients to nutrition-poor foods used in third world countries in East Africa. She has a Ph.D. from Carnegie Mellon University and is StartUptown's first full-time employee.

Speaking about Uptown Partners, Jeanne described her organization as a transformative tool. Their goal is to be a destination point, rather than simply a pass-through on the way to or from Downtown Pittsburgh. They are trying to build a sense of place within the community, and their projects reflect that. One was a community visioning project, designed to suggest proposals for the fate of the former Fifth Avenue School. A local artist, James Simon, who is also the Co-President of Uptown Partners' Board of Directors, designed a beautiful welcome sign on the Fifth Avenue side of the Birmingham Bridge with the help of kids from the Hill District.

In her mission to create a clean, safe, and vibrant neighborhood, Jeanne deals with the problem of tear-downs by a few unscrupulous landlords, works with the city on plans for addressing the lack of parking, and has concerns about drugs and homeless people in the neighborhood. The area is also an Eco-Innovation District, and they have worked with OPDC on water mitigation issues originating in Schenley Park.

Uptown Partners receives funding from Duquesne University, Neighborhood Allies, and McAuley Ministries, whose mission is to serve the underserved. Twenty-five percent of the housing in Uptown is low-income housing. Both Jeanne and Dale would like to see the area become a mixed-income neighborhood, with a mixture of commercial and residential properties. To that end, they are looking for the right developers to help carry out that plan. They do not want the area to become gentrified with lower income residents suddenly unable to afford to stay. Dale referenced a comment from Mayor Peduto about innovation districts helping to create a values-driven smart city as a way of branding Pittsburgh.

Following our tour of Uptown Partners and StartUptown, we took a van tour of Duquesne's campus, James Simon's studio, and future startup space in the old Paramount Studio Film Exchange on the Blvd. of the Allies. This building is an expansion of StartUptown and will house more small startups and co-working spaces, along with a photography studio and a café. Mr. McNutt hopes to purchase more buildings in the neighborhood in order to create a campus of startup locations.

Minutes submitted by Laurie Cohen, June 24, 2014

