

Senate Community Relations Committee meeting

11:00 – 2:00 p.m.

Room 272, Hillman Library

November 20, 2012

Attendees: Denise Chisholm, SHRS; Laurie Cohen, ULS, Co-Chair; Sabina Deitrick, UCSUR; Tara Sherry-Torres, OPDC; Trevor Smith, CHS; Martha Ann Terry, School of Public health; Wanda Wilson, OPDC

The only agenda item from the co-chairs was a reminder about Christmas Day at Pitt. The bulk of the meeting was turned over to Wanda Wilson, who updated the members of the committee about the Oakland 2025 report. Copies of the report were passed around the table, and we went through different points in the report.

The report represents the first real master plan for Oakland in 30 years, so this was a major accomplishment. A large number of groups came together to make comprehensive changes in the planning process. There was a huge level of involvement in community meetings, breakout sessions, brainstorming sessions, and focus groups.

The main theme in Section 3 of the plan is on housing and the need to stabilize the housing market in the neighborhood. There was a market analysis done by the consultants on the project and they were able to identify the homeowner-occupied areas, along with multi-family housing sections and rental properties. One of the suggestions that resulted from the plan is to create more diversity and concentrate additional rental/multi-family apartments in the core of the neighborhood, with homeowners residing in the outskirts.

Strategies for doing this include code enforcement efforts, as coordinated with the Oakwatch program, and employer-incentive programs. This would involve local employers encouraging their employees to live in the neighborhood. One idea is in support of a revolving pool of funds to purchase properties before developers snap them up. This is known as a Land Bank, and for a fair price and transparency in the process, people downsizing in Oakland would sell their home to OPDC, who would then offer it for sale to interested buyers.

This would serve to increase demand for homeownership in Oakland. In terms of supply and demand, there is a ready supply of housing available in Oakland. The idea of land banking could be considered an additional benefit of working in Oakland by the institutions, and might be marketed as such in their recruitment efforts. If the Oakland institutions participated in Employer Assisted Housing, employers would contribute money to this land bank. Workers living and working in Oakland would contribute to a reduction in transportation problems and the employers would reap the benefits of longer retention.

Another major theme in the report was transportation. There are recommendations for a true multi-modal system in Oakland, using the Complete Streets model. There would be intermodal parking facilities on the edges of Oakland, with shuttle loops throughout Oakland, to keep more motor vehicle traffic out of the core streets. Bus Rapid Transit is one method to keep traffic moving in and out of the neighborhood, and that group is conducting studies on the viability of changing the current traffic patterns. They are examining the duplication of transport services in the area and pooling resources for one systematic shuttle system. There have been complaints in the past about the multiplicity of university buses and shuttles and overlapping services. Bike infrastructure was also examined, and one recommendation was a two-way separated cycle track on Forbes Avenue.

In terms of development, there are some sites being considered, such as the proposed re-development at Craig and Centre on the former Giant Eagle site. OPDC has been working with BACA, the local business district there, to discuss improvements to the corridor.

In terms of open space and art in Oakland, the Western PA Conservancy received funds from UPMC and Pitt to restore the hillside along Bates Avenue leading down to the Parkway. Invasive weeds will be tamed and new plantings will refurbish the streetscape.

A section of the plan dealing with community building is working on ways to keep the community engaged, now that the hard work of planning has begun. A new resident organization has been formed, with representatives from each neighborhood. This group, COR, supersedes OCC, the Oakland Citizens Council. Tara Sherry-Torres is working with this group in capacity building. They are trying to identify policy issues like parking that affect specific groups and assist with support and activism.

South Oakland does not have a formal group, but Tara is working with women in that area to form a group in support of immigrant communities who come to Oakland. They would disseminate information about existing resources and services, transportation options, and how resources could be combined and leveraged.

Sabina Deitrick had high praise for the report and for Wanda's efforts throughout the process. She said that having a plan for the neighborhood makes it much more effective.

Martha Ann Terry expressed her concern about the lack of public schools in the neighborhood, which remains a serious issue.

Members of the CRC were encouraged to familiarize themselves with the plan and let others know about its existence. We should emphasize the uniqueness of this plan over past efforts, which were not as comprehensive. We were also encouraged to keep discussing the topic of Employer Assisted Housing and the University's need to support this concept.

Sabina mentioned the age of the housing stock in Oakland and how renovations programs might develop. There may also need to be some regulatory changes in terms of parking and/or zoning.

Submitted January 8, 2013
Laurie Cohen