

The Right to Stay Put:

City Garden Montessori School and Neighborhood Change

A Report for the Affordable Housing Task Force



DEVELOPING SUSTAINABLE URBAN COMMUNITIES
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INCLUSIVITY, DIVERSITY, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE: CITY GARDEN MONTESSORI

City Garden Montessori is a public charter school located in the Botanical Heights neighborhood of St. Louis. Founded in 1995 as a preschool in the Forest Park Southeast neighborhood of St. Louis, the school's mission is unique to the students and communities it serves. City Garden was founded by a set of parents who live in these neighborhoods and were determined to create an excellent, diverse community school. In 2008, City Garden began offering an elementary educational component through the sponsorship of nearby St. Louis University. As a public charter institution, the school offers a tuition-free elementary school education in addition to a sliding scale fee-based preschool program.

The neighborhoods served by City Garden include Botanical Heights, Forest Park Southeast, Shaw, Tiffany, and portions of Southwest Garden. Focused on these South City neighborhoods, City Garden is designed to serve the unique needs and challenges that its communities face. Central to this educational mission is creating a space that is integrated and reflective of the racial and socioeconomic diversity of the surrounding neighborhoods. In the words of Christie Huck, City Garden's Executive Director,

"We believe integration is key to creating a new model for what is possible in education, and in neighborhoods, in St. Louis and beyond. Through our school community, we are working to dismantle racism, to confront and acknowledge privilege and to create a system that deeply supports and nurtures every child and family."

Reflecting this mission and the surrounding communities, the student body is 46% Black, 48% White, and 6% Hispanic, Asian, or another race. In light of this foundational commitment to the neighborhoods adjacent to the school, affordable housing and racial equity have become access points for the school to fulfill its mission in the community by enhancing access to its resources and programs for the families it hopes to serve.

An Affordable Housing Task Force has been established by the leadership of City Garden Montessori in order to evaluate the causes of recent demographic changes occurring in the school's catchment area and to advocate for the active preservation of housing affordability in the area as it becomes increasingly attractive to developers.

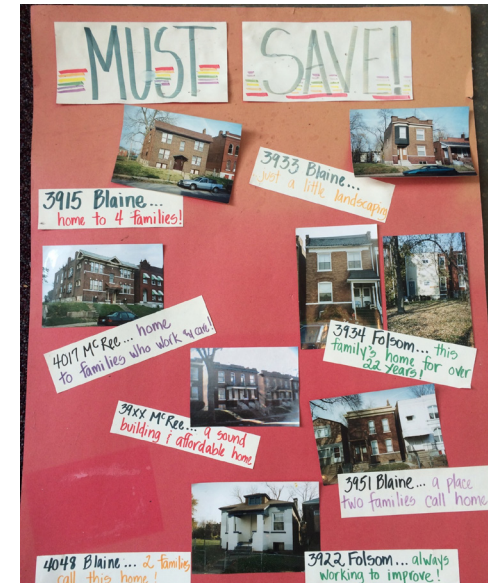


ST. LOUIS DEVELOPMENT IN CONTEXT: A NEIGHBORHOOD APPROACH

Like many other Midwestern rust belt cities, St. Louis experienced rapid decline beginning in the mid-twentieth century and continuing into the twenty-first century. By 2010, the City on the Mississippi had lost 63% of its 1950 population[1]. The result was decades of suburban expansion, “white flight,” and unprecedented economic decline.

Looking to the present, however, St. Louis has undergone significant changes. During the period 2000 to 2010, neighborhoods located in the Central Corridor[2] enjoyed substantial population growth and economic investments with the addition of new housing development, public transit infrastructure, and popular amenities. In Central neighborhoods like Midtown, the Central West End, and Downtown West, the cumulative population increase was roughly 450%.

While these renewed investments in St. Louis are promising, the changes spurred by these developments have many community members concerned about the opportunities that exist for the residents who stayed during St. Louis’ decline. Most recently, population losses within the city’s neighborhoods have been most significant among Black or African American residents. For the first time in several decades, many neighborhoods have once again become majority white[3], raising concerns about the residential displacement of low-income and Black residents. As these central neighborhoods reached stability, peripheral neighborhoods such as Shaw, Botanical Heights, Southwest Garden, and Forest Park South-east (FPSE) have experienced a growth that mirrors the changes enjoyed by the neighborhoods of the city’s central corridor.



These posters were created by neighborhood residents in protest of the wholesale leveling of six blocks in what was formerly know as the McRee Town neighborhood by the end of 2005. The area was redeveloped into Botanical Heights.

FOREST PARK SOUTHEAST

Forest Park Southeast (FPSE) is a neighborhood located on the periphery of the Central Corridor, bounded by the anchor institutions of Washington University School of Medicine and Barnes Jewish Hospital to the north and McRee Avenue to the south. Located less than one mile from City Garden Montessori, FPSE lies within the school's primary catchment area of focus.

Once an industry-dense area servicing the Missouri Pacific railroad, the FPSE neighborhood lost a significant portion of its middle-class White population beginning in the 1970s. By 2000, over 80% of the neighborhood's residents were Black or African American and the poverty rate stood at 48%[4].

The mid-2000s were quite different for the neighborhood, bringing distinct changes and reinvestment to the FPSE neighborhood. These changes were aided in large part by interests from development partnerships through the Washington University Medical Center Redevelopment Corporation (WUMCRC) and Park Central Development Corporation, both of which have since invested considerably in the private residential and commercial revitalization of FPSE. Non-profit community development organization Rise has also been involved in FPSE development efforts in partnership with WUMCRC, pursuing opportunities to increase the availability of affordable housing.

The proximity of FPSE to Central Corridor centers of employment has incentivized the movement of professionals to the neighborhood. At the northern border of FPSE is the newly-constructed Cortex Innovation District, a 200-acre development projected to create 13,000 advanced-skill and technology jobs[5]. Within the neighborhood, development of the Manchester Avenue commercial district – referred to as the Grove – has brought enhanced economic activity to the FPSE neighborhood over the last decade.



BOTANICAL HEIGHTS

Formerly the neighborhood of McRee Town, Botanical Heights was the product of a large-scale redevelopment plan spearheaded by the City of St. Louis and the Missouri Botanical Garden District Commission. At the time of the redevelopment, McRee Town was a predominantly low-income and Black neighborhood. Due to high rates of crime and violence, the Garden District Commission demolished nearly 300 historic buildings on six consecutive blocks and cleared several acres of land, replacing these buildings with suburban-style, single-family homes. The 143 new homes, which were built to attract a solidly upper-middle class tax base, ranged in price from the mid-\$100,000's to \$400,000[8][9] and significantly reduced the availability of accessible and affordable housing for former, long-term residents.

Today, the newly constructed homes and rebranded commercial areas are visible in the eastern district of the neighborhood, while the western area has some remaining vacancies and undeveloped green space from the redevelopment plan. Development activity has been bolstered by the presence of Urban Improvement Construction (UIC) and the Garden District Commission, as well as anchor institutions in City Garden Montessori and the nearby Botanical Gardens.



SHAW

The Shaw neighborhood was developed by the Missouri Botanical Garden founder, Henry Shaw, in the late 19th century. The diverse and impressive housing in the neighborhood has attracted people to St. Louis City for decades. The central bloc of the Shaw neighborhood is Flora Place, which contains some of the most expensive and beautiful housing stock in St. Louis City. Shaw also features some of the lowest vacancy rates within the city.

After its amenities, the impetus for continued development in Shaw lies in its residential properties, which include both large single-family residences and multi-family units and apartments. Much of this residential development is supported by the neighborhood's own community development corporation (CDC), the Tower Grove Neighborhoods CDC[10], and the Shaw Neighborhood Improvement Association. As a neighborhood-based development entity, the Tower Grove Neighborhoods CDC has a stated objective of "promoting responsible development, affordable housing and diverse character"[11].

Yet recent years of development have seen a downward trend in the variety of its housing stock, with multi-family units undergoing single-family conversions. In addition, several private developers have capitalized on the remaining vacant and Land Reauthorization Authority (LRA)-owned properties to build new construction single-family properties that have raised concerns about wholesale decreases in the availability of rental units[12].



TRACKING DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES, 2000-2010 [6]

FOREST PARK SOUTHEAST

- 30% loss of Black population
- 109% increase in non-Black population
- 26% loss of families earning less than \$50,000 per year
- 30% increase in Section 8 renters
- 37% increase in available rental units
- 55% increase in median rent

BOTANICAL HEIGHTS

- 42% loss of Black population
- 10% loss of non-Black population
- 67% loss of families earning less than \$50,000 per year
- 53.3% decrease in Section 8 renters
- 28% decrease in available rental units
- 10% decrease in median rent

SHAW

- 45% loss of Black population
- 26% increase in non-Black population
- 35% loss of families earning less than \$50,000 per year
- 94% decrease in Section 8 renters
- 21% decrease in available rental units
- 27% increase in median rent



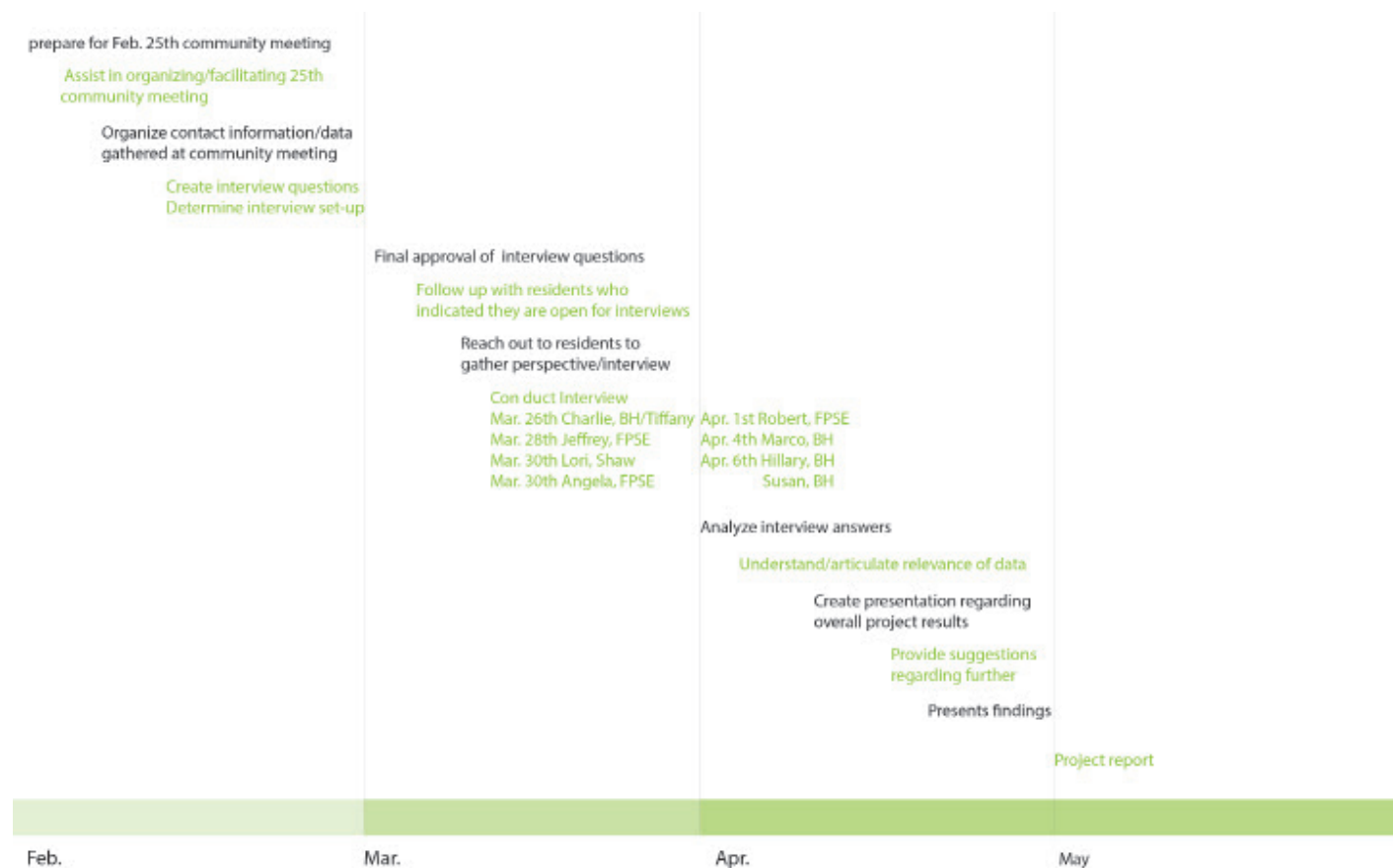
A formerly vacant property in the Botanical Heights neighborhood that has been developed into an upscale bar and eatery.



PROCESS & METHODS

In order to unearth the nuances of why there has been a large loss of Black residents and low-income residents in the City Garden catchment neighborhoods since 2000, the project team gathered several sets of qualitative data.

Project Timeline



COMMUNITY MEETING:

In partnership with City Garden and members of the Affordable Housing Task Force, the project team planned and conducted a community meeting on February 25, 2015. Outreach and marketing were conducted via Facebook, email blasts to the school's list serve, and door-to-door flyering in the catchment area. According to the sign-in sheets, 67 people from the catchment area neighborhoods attended the meeting. The first part of the meeting provided residents with data about their neighborhoods' demographic changes and available resources regarding affordable housing and homeownership. The second half consisted of breakout sessions in which small groups of residents were asked what they like about their neighborhoods, challenges in the area, their vision for the future, and potential policy ideas for achieving this future vision. This meeting allowed the project team to develop a broad sense of the community's attitudes about the changes that have been occurring in their neighborhoods and to make connections to potential interviewees.

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS:

The project team selected 17 potential interviewees to contact based on information from the survey conducted by City Garden (see #3 below), information from members of the Affordable Housing Task Force, and connections made to residents during the community meeting. Of those 17 people contacted, the project team was able to conduct in-person interviews with 8 people. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 90 minutes. The demographic breakdown of the interviewees is as follows:

- Ages range from 36 to 73; average age is 52.75
- 4 female and 4 male
- 1 interviewee lives in Shaw, 3 live in Botanical Heights, 1 now lives in University City after being displaced from Botanical Heights, 1 lives in Tiffany, and 2 live in Forest Park Southeast
- 3 interviewees rent their housing, 4 own their housing, and 1 has housing that comes with their job
- No interviewees receive rental assistance
- Income ranges from below \$26,000 per year to above \$90,000 per year; average income of interviewees is approximately \$47,700. One person declined to share their income level.
- Length of time living in the neighborhood ranges from 6 months to 39 years; average length of time in the neighborhood is 15.8 years

The project team reviewed these interviews to find salient and repeated themes pertaining to the social, economical, and political reasons for the demographic changes in these neighborhoods. Direct quotations from the interviews in the findings section below are attributed to pseudonyms to protect the privacy of the participants.

CITY GARDEN COMMUNITY SURVEY REVIEW:

The project team was given access to data from 86 responses to an electronically distributed survey conducted by City Garden Montessori. The school conducted this survey in order to gain insight into affordable housing-related issues in the catchment area from the perspective of parents whose children attend City Garden. Though the project team did not conduct a complete analysis of the data from this survey or the demographics of its participants, below are a few key features of the respondents:

- 20% of respondents no longer live in the catchment neighborhoods
- 61% of respondents' children are not eligible for free or reduced lunch or reduced primary tuition
- 38% of respondents rent their housing
- 44% of respondents stated that they are "somewhat confident" or "not confident" that they will be able to continue living in the neighborhoods City Garden serves

The project team utilized qualitative data from this survey's open-ended questions to supplement the interview data and to increase the number of community voices in this report. Quotations from this survey are attributed to "community survey respondent" rather than by a pseudonym.

FINDINGS

Market-Based Mechanisms of Displacement

Non-Market Mechanisms of Displacement

Political & Government-Based Mechanisms of Displacement

PUSHED OUT BY PRICE

Rising rents and property values were the most salient mechanism of displacement for low-income residents in the catchment area that arose in the resident interviews. One of the residents we spoke to was Lori, a Shaw resident whose family is experiencing a price crisis in their neighborhood. Lori and her family moved into Shaw two years ago so that the family's children could attend City Garden Montessori. At that time, the family moved into a 2-bedroom, 1,000 square foot apartment costing \$700 a month. Now that her landlord is selling her building, her family is being displaced and she has been looking at apartments for rent. She reported that so far, she has been unable to find anything comparable for less than \$850, which is unaffordable for her family.

"We call on every rent sign we see, but they're all too much...When we moved in there were a lot of lower-income families like us – now they are almost all gone. The biggest change since we moved here has been in property prices." Lori continued to discuss issues that people looking to rent or buy in the area are facing, stating that "the minute a property is listed, it's gone in an instant, even if it's overpriced. Even really rough properties are getting snatched up."

There are increasingly fewer possibilities for affordable housing options within the catchment area. Low-income individuals and families are finding it difficult to compete for affordable housing within the drastically changing market. Marco, another interviewee, lived in Botanical Heights for six years before having to move elsewhere because of his rent rising steeply; before he moved away, he reported noticing that other people he knew were being forced out due to property owners and leasing companies raising their rents.

Having lived in Tiffany for 20 years, resident and homeowner Charlie has been aware of his neighborhood's re-development for an extended period of time. He is observing a continuous change from a low-income and working class neighborhood to a higher-end, higher-income neighborhood. Charlie explained these changes in his interview:

"Right now, there's a lot of remodeling, infill housing, lots of activity...It's surprising. People are starting to expand their properties. If I was trying to buy a house today, I would be hard pressed to find one I could afford in the neighborhood."

Robert, a long time resident of Forest Park Southeast, has had a similar experience, noting that the current market activity is driving away lower income people:

"There's a house three houses down from here that has been vacant for all 13 years I've been here. Someone bought it last January and they're gutting it. There are trucks outside from a prominent rehab company. They're putting in granite counters. The rents here are going up because of rehabs."

The increase in new development and rehabilitation of properties within these neighborhoods is contributing significantly to the shift from low-income, working class neighborhoods to high-income neighborhoods in the catchment area. Some long-term and/or lower income residents are fearful of this change and the possibility of losing housing options. As Lori from Shaw explains:

"[Long-term residents] were here during the hard times, put in the work for neighborhood watches and stuff, and now they're not allowed to participate in the good times."

BIG DEVELOPERS BUYING UP PROPERTY

Residents have taken note of the large organizations and developers buying up large numbers of properties in their neighborhoods. This trend is especially true in Forest Park Southeast, in which Urban Improvement Construction (UIC) and the Washington University Medical Center Redevelopment Corporation (WUMCRC) have been buying and developing large numbers of properties for years.

While the residents we interviewed consistently pointed out the activities of these organizations, reactions to them were mixed. On the one hand, one community survey respondent stated that

“with the massive housing/building development in this area, I have a hard time envisioning a lot of current residents being able to afford to stay here.”

Similarly, interviewee Lori is currently experiencing strain caused by developers’ presence in the neighborhood. She has depended on the city’s LRA garden lease program for several years in order to supplement her family’s ability to purchase healthy food; now, however, there are no available lots in Shaw for this purpose, and Lori has observed that the lots left in Forest Park Southeast are quickly being bought up by UIC, boarded up, and either developed into market-rate housing or re-sold at a profit with no improvements. In Lori’s perception,

“UIC only sells [the properties they acquire] to people who want to make high-income properties on them. It’s basically a commitment to buyers that they will change their block.”

Another respondent from the community survey echoes Lori’s experience, saying that

“many developers have the intent on changing the neighborhood and getting their ‘return on investment.’ It’s not about affordability, it’s about how much it can be sold for as they get the properties for almost nothing.”

On the other hand, Angela, who works with a neighborhood organization in FPSE with a focus on developing residents’ capacity for homeownership, provided a different perspective on UIC’s presence in the neighborhood. In her experience, there exists room for cooperation between grassroots groups and bigger developers, a win-win situation.

“UIC was instantly interested in working with us. It looks good for them, working with us. We’re trying to come up with money to get some of our people qualified to live in their houses. They’re honest with us, whether we like it, want to hear it, are supposed to hear it, or not.”

WUMCRC currently owns about 85 properties in FPSE, and recently issued a request for information for the development of these properties requiring that a minimum of 20% affordable housing be part of any proposal. WUMCRC’s presence in FPSE has drawn ire from some long-time neighborhood residents. Robert, a religious leader in the neighborhood, provided a candid opinion:

“I dislike that Washinton University owns so much of the neighborhood and has done nothing for years. They are huge slumlords. People in the neighborhoods have suffered through WashU’s crap.”

He agrees, however, that the area has been in need of positive change in terms of safety and appearance, and that developers can play a role in making that change happen:

“The 85 properties should be developed with input from people in the neighborhood. There is always tension: no one wants to live in a boarded-up, rat-infested neighborhood full of drugs, but there hasn’t been a strong, organized community voice in the development process.”

NO HELP WITH HOME REPAIR

The financial capability of residents to maintain the safety and aesthetic appeal of their homes in the catchment area neighborhoods is a theme that arose in our interviews, particularly regarding the Forest Park Southeast neighborhood. Angela, one interviewee whose family has owned their house in FPSE for nearly 50 years, stated that she's nervous about the people who keep coming by to ask if they want to sell:

"It's intimidating," she said. "People are trying to come in and take these houses."

She knows a family that's leaving the neighborhood because

"they can't fix their house up fast enough. Nobody's said anything yet, but if someone comes around and sees something wrong with their house or if they have to get an inspection, they'll have to move because they don't have the money to fix it."

Angela is worried about her own property, too, especially because of the contrast between the way her home looks and the way the new developments and rehabs in the neighborhood look.

"I'm scared – my building doesn't look like what they're building here and I'm afraid of getting fined. Lots of people are afraid."

The strong outside interest in FPSE property has led to long-time, lower income residents being more vulnerable to displacement if someone – a speculator, a neighbor, or anyone else – reports any issues with their property to the city.

St. Louis City's Community Development Administration runs its Healthy Home Repair program to address this exact problem. The program, funded by federal dollars, is limited to households that make less than 80% of the area median income.[14] Eligibility for the program requires households to meet a long list of requirements, including owning and living in the home for at least two years, a clear title, being up to date on real estate taxes, being current on mortgage payments, and having homeowner's insurance.[15] These requirements may prove to be barriers to some potential applicants for home repair funds, but the biggest problem with the Healthy Home Repair program is the great lengths of time applicants must wait before receiving their funds. The length of the waitlist is not available on the program's website, but according to the executive director of a community development organization serving a large swath of South City, the average wait time to receive home repair funds is between one month in emergency cases and several years in non-priority cases.[16] Lower income residents feeling intensified pressure to make safety and aesthetic improvements on their homes are therefore not able to access the resources they require to do so within a reasonable amount of time, reducing the likelihood that they will be able to maintain their property up to code and stay in the neighborhood.

SHRINKING HOUSING STOCK

The housing market within the catchment area is becoming more competitive as redevelopment efforts are reducing the number of available apartments. One respondent to the community survey specifically pointed out the connectedness of shrinking numbers of available rentals and a loss of affordable housing, stating that

“There is a definite shift of multifamily units to single-family homes at the cost of affordable housing in the area.”

Long-term residents will have fewer housing opportunities as four units are converted to two, and two units are converted to one. Lori has personally observed this redevelopment as well, and she recognizes that this shift is threatening her family's ability to stay in the neighborhood:

“We’re about to get kicked out because the landlord is selling the building to make a profit. The 4-flat we live in will be turned into a 2-flat. We are not on a lease right now and therefore have no protection. We’re pretty devastated.”

She sees this turn of events as a pattern in the neighborhood, stating that

“Many apartments are being redone and made into townhouses. I know of a 4-flat on Cleveland that has been redone to make only one unit.”

These conversions of many units into fewer units are reducing the available housing stock in the catchment area.

MARKET

NON-MARKET

POLITICAL FORCE

LACK OF SOCIAL COHESION: ALIENATION AND MARGINALIZATION

As new neighborhood amenities are developed in the neighborhoods, some long-term and lower income residents are questioning which residents will be able to enjoy these comforts. New development of relatively expensive retail and entertainment options, especially along Manchester in the Grove, socially separates the neighborhoods' various demographic groups. Several interview participants from Forest Park Southeast expressed the feeling that the changes are part of a "neighborhood takeover." The word "high-end" has been used to describe some of the new developments, such as a new grocery store that will sell relatively expensive products. Angela explains it this way:

"The new stuff is beautiful, but it's not for us. We would love a grocery store nearby, Schnucks or whatever, but they're putting in a high-end one. What are we going to do with that? They use those words: 'high-end.' For who? People would be ecstatic if an affordable grocery store opened around here."

Another example Angela provided was how dog parks, a place of potential socialization and mixing in the neighborhood, do not meet the needs of the African American residents in the community. There is currently one dog park in Shaw and another one in the works for Forest Park Southeast.

"African American people often have dogs for protection," she explained. "That means my dog can't play with your little dog. We walk our dogs around the block. The dog park is useless to us. What we need is a community center."

Another way in which some groups of residents have been marginalized in the catchment area is the minimal representation of people of color and renters in community leadership. We heard from several interviewees that local neighborhood associations, especially those in Tiffany and Botanical Heights, are disproportionately composed of white residents who are homeowners. Charlie, who is involved with the organized neighborhood leadership of Tiffany and Botanical Heights, explained that residents have the perception that renters do not care about investing in the neighborhood:

"People at the meetings are primarily homeowners and mostly white. Renters feel like they're not going to be there [because they'll move on in a short period of time]. There's a 30-year renter who wouldn't come because she was 'uncertain' about staying. They don't want to invest. Homeowners want to protect their investment in the neighborhood."

According to several of the residents we spoke to, the voices of renters and of African American residents are not being heard in their neighborhoods' decision-making processes.

LACK OF SOCIAL COHESION: A CULTURE OF SUSPICION

Different expectations of the neighborhood have also divided new residents and long-term residents. Lori described these new residents as “hip young professionals who want to live in the city and are really disappointed that it is not like the suburbs.” This mismatch of expectations and experiences has led to new residents complaining of long-term residents’ behaviors, through online media and to various city officials, creating an even larger divide and misunderstanding between the two groups:

“The gentrification going on is really rough. On our Next Door site, lots of people write offensive things. For example, one person wrote about a ‘threatening’ guy in an SUV. I had walked by the same person that day and it was just an African American dude sitting in his car. People don’t understand living in an urban environment...When we moved here most of the people were cool and coexisting. This has slowly faded.”

This culture of suspicion that Lori described is specifically centered around African American residents.

“I know some black families that have been harassed by the DFS for child neglect because they let their kids roam around the neighborhood, and people call to report. But the people reporting these residents are also the ones posting [on Next Door] about free range parenting. They are making assumptions about these kids committing crimes based on their race. No one will ever say it’s due to race, but that’s how it breaks down.”

Residents’ reports of their interactions with police also speak to this culture of suspicion. In Angela’s experience, people call the police to have them break up groups of people – specifically groups of African American residents – who are spending time together outside of their houses.

“It’s gotten worse recently,” she stated. “My boys can’t have friends come around without being stopped and checked...There are a few knuckleheads out there who make it bad from everybody...But there’s a new ambiance in the neighborhood, things have gotten better. So why can’t we do what we do? Why can’t we put chairs outside of our houses?”

Angela is in favor of increased police presence in the neighborhood, but only if that presence is making the area a safe and secure place for everyone:

“Some people around here have wanted to raise homeowners’ taxes to increase security in the Grove – not in the side streets, where we live. We would love more protection, but if we pay for it, we want it for us, too!”

NOT IN MY BACKYARD: NUISANCE ORDINANCE

Several of our interviewees cited the city's nuisance laws as a policy-driven mechanism of displacement. The ordinance defines a "nuisance" as "detrimental to the safety, health, morals, or repose of any inhabitants of the City of St. Louis."^[17] If one or more incidents related to illegal drugs and/or weapons are reported to the police within one year, or if two or more incidents related to prostitution, gambling, violation of business licensing reg., commission of any offense punishable by 90 days in jail, false reporting to the police, or "maintaining or permitting a condition or engaging in an activity which unreasonably annoys, injures, or endangers the safety, health, morals, or repose of any inhabitants of the city" are reported to the police within one year, a property is considered a nuisance.^[18] The property owner is notified via a cease and desist letter from the city that they need to take reasonable measures to abate the nuisance. If the owner does not abate the nuisance within 30 days, they receive a summons and are subject to an escalating series of fines, up to 90 days in jail, and possibly the city boarding up their property for one year.

The nuisance ordinance comes to bear on the demographic changes going on in the catchment area neighborhoods in several ways. The fines and other consequences that landlords face in nuisance situations can incentivize them to quickly evict tenants instead of choosing other abatement measures or working with tenants to resolve the issue. Moreover, the broad berth of issues encompassed by the loose language of the ordinance allows it to be used to address many different behaviors, not all of which are necessarily destructive to neighborhood residents, but may be an "annoyance" to some neighbors. Angela stated that newer neighbors on her street call the police to report such things as "a few people hanging out on somebody's front porch or someone's yard not looking sharp enough." She connects these types of calls to people being evicted from their apartments:

"Landlords aren't keeping their properties up, and people are being put out in the street with no warning – once the police get involved from people calling, the landlords just put people out... How come the landlords aren't accountable for what's going on? The nuisance law gets people kicked out when it's not them that's the problem."

MARKET

NON-MARKET

POLITICAL FORCE

Higher-income neighborhood residents corroborated these attitudes in their interviews. Susan, a resident of Botanical Heights, asserted:

“People here don’t know the ‘norms of the neighborhood.’ They don’t know the social norms and they don’t know how to take care of their properties.”

Hillary, another Botanical Heights resident, explicitly connected her desire for older residents to move out with her disapproval of their behavior:

“We don’t want people [low-income residents] who are currently here, to stay. They don’t know how to behave in the neighborhood. We would prefer to have middle income families move into the neighborhood.”

On the other hand, we also heard from residents that resolving nuisance situations can be an important part of developing and maintaining neighborhoods in which people feel safe and comfortable. Nuisance abatement and code enforcement are key tools in neighborhood revitalization efforts, ensuring that landlords appropriately maintain their buildings, and creating safer and more orderly living environments for residents.^[19] Charlie, a neighborhood leader, reported that the Tiffany and Botanical Heights neighborhood associations and residents have “used nuisance ordinances against people. There’s a BP gas station on Grand that was having a lot of issues. We pressured them through the nuisance ordinance to get rid of the crime and drug dealing that was happening there. There was a whole host of very bad incidents. It gives a bad reputation to the neighborhood.”

The nuisance ordinance thus connects a variety of problems stemming from misunderstanding between neighbors, residents’ differential financial means for home upkeep, tension between landlords and their tenants, and legitimately unsafe situations occurring in the catchment area neighborhoods. While the nuisance ordinance can work in everybody’s favor when deployed appropriately, it is also contributing to marginalizing and displacing long-term, lower income people from the catchment area neighborhoods who are not necessarily contributing to an unsafe environment.

“VISUAL POLLUTION”: OPEN STORAGE AND THE DIVISION OF FORESTRY

The physical appearance of a neighborhood and its structures plays an important role in how a community is perceived. Many neighborhoods enforce strict regulations on the maintenance of yards, garden beds, and private green space to achieve a consistency of appearance throughout a neighborhood. This “beautification” process may even be enforced through city ordinances or neighborhood-based organizations.

In St. Louis City, Ordinances 66857 and Chapter 11.66 of Ordinance 59481 are two local-level municipal codes that have directly affected residents in the City Garden catchment area. The two ordinances address the collection of what the City deems is either hazardous or undesirable material on the private property of residents. For instance, the text of Ordinance 66857 specifically bans the open storage of any item in visible locations on residential property or in its immediate area[20]. Thought not well-defined, the provision of this clause usually includes items such as derelict vehicles, broken fences, and normal debris or garbage[21]. Yet the open storage clause can even extend to regulate the unintentional collection of naturally-occurring rainwater

While in many cases, having areas of open storage poses a hazard for residents and can cause injury, the ambiguous nature of this ordinance and its broad enforcement was worrisome to many of the residents whom we interviewed.

One of these residents is Jeffrey, a low-income, five-year resident of the Botanical Heights neighborhood. Jeffrey lives on disability benefits as a result of a severe back injury and recurring seizures from a diagnosis of epilepsy. Despite his difficulties with mobility, Jeffrey’s main interests are in gardening and landscaping, and he’s open about being a self-identified horticulturist.

On many days, Jeffrey’s collection of gardening supplies, unplanted soil, and potted plants are visible from the street and have caught the attention of the newer residents, who take issue with what they see as unkempt property and less than “what is expected.” But the most concerning situation occurred in response to the collection of open storage items that did not even belong to Jeffrey.

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Citing the illegal dumping of large and heavy tree logs in the alleyway behind his house, Jeffrey stated that the City and the Division of Forestry were called to come and assess the collection and notify him of his violation. Thereafter, Jeffrey received a citation for open storage on his property in the amount of \$200 for the collection of tree debris that he claims was put there by illegal dumpers. To Jeffrey, the burden of the hefty citation and the months-long fight with the Division to appeal the citation was too much:

"I'm disabled, you know? I can't take those big logs and dump them [behind] my house. And I wasn't able to move them. So, after fighting [the Forestry Division] for 6 months, it finally went to a collection agency, and then...they called me...and I told them, 'there's no way I could have ever put those logs behind my house. I'm disabled.'"

Eventually, Jeffrey quit appealing the decision and chose to pay the citation, at which time had accrued double fines and had been turned over to a collections agency. As stated in the ordinance covering these kinds of open storage violations, the City even reserves the right to place a lien on a property that has not met its debt obligations for overdue and excessive violations.

The physical and financial challenges that Jeffrey faces were emphasized by his experience with appealing a violation that he does not have the physical capacity to have perpetrated. Just as the neighborhood and the yards around Jeffrey are becoming more homogeneous, individuals like him may find themselves fighting new battles that can exacerbate the longstanding challenges of affordable housing.

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SUBSIDIZING THE WEALTHIER: TAX ABATEMENT

Real estate tax abatement is an incentive program to assist individuals, developers, and businesses with renovation and new construction projects.[22] The support of the alderman responsible for the property in question is critical to the process, as the application for tax abatement requires a letter of support from the alderman, who later presents a bill to the Housing, Urban Development and Zoning Committee of the Board of Aldermen in order to get the abatement proposal approved. If a project is new construction, the owner would pay taxes based on the value of the pre-development land assessment; likewise, if the project is a renovation, the owner pays taxes based on the property's value prior to the renovation.[23] The tax abatement usually lasts for 5 to 10 years.

The way in which tax abatement has been granted and utilized within the catchment area has resulted in it becoming a mechanism of displacing lower-income people. Several residents mentioned the distribution of tax abatement as a problem, particularly in the Shaw neighborhood and the 8th Ward more broadly. While analyzing all instances of tax abatement being granted in the catchment area is beyond the scope of this project, we will highlight two examples in which "spot-blighting" was utilized as justification for granting tax abatement. The first, 3501 Juniata, is technically south of the City Garden catchment area but is within the same city ward as Shaw. This property was purchased in 2007 for \$385,876.[24] Alderman Conway proposed Board Bill 201 to grant tax abatement for new construction, and a 10-year abatement was granted.[25] Since then, taxes on the property have ranged from \$205 in 2009 to \$230 in 2014 annually.[26] The second example does fall directly within the catchment area, in the Shaw neighborhood (also in the Eighth Ward). Board Bill 30 gave 3670 Flora Place a five-year abatement because it was "in bad shape," according to Alderman Conway when he presented the bill.[27] The property was purchased for \$380,000 in 2013[28]; since abatement was granted, hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of improvements have been made to the property.



3670 Flora Place in the Shaw neighborhood

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In both of these cases, the properties sold for a large amount of money in the first place, calling into question why the incentive of tax abatement was necessary or appropriate. Flora Place, for example, is widely regarded as one of the most desirable streets in the whole city. In the City Garden catchment neighborhoods, tax abatement is being granted to people who already have the means to purchase valuable properties and in areas that are experiencing market-driven development even without tax abatement. Residents in the City Garden catchment area have begun to take note of the way in which this tool is being used. As one resident of Shaw posted on his neighborhood blog:

Shaw is one of the most desirable areas in the entire city and people will buy here with or without tax abatement... Tax abatement artificially raises home prices and is helping to drive working class families out of Shaw... I believe people who can afford to purchase a newly rehabbed home in Shaw can also afford to pay some property taxes. [Alderman] Conway is giving away the bank and hurting those who can least afford the hit. Perhaps the most egregious example during this legislative session is the 5 year tax abatement given to the owners of a \$380,000 home on Flora Place. Come on guys, pay your fair share.[29]

The East-West Gateway Council of Governments has found that tax incentives such as tax abatement have been utilized problematically all over the city, not just in the City Garden catchment area. In the period between 1997 and 2007, the City of St. Louis accounted for more than 75% of the regional total, abating about \$300 million in property taxes.[30] A 2009 study found that in 2007, nearly 16% of the City's assessed property value had been granted tax abatement.[31] Moreover, tax incentives have been found to be used more often in higher-income communities, which "gives those jurisdictions what amounts to an unneeded, extra advantage" and has worsened the region's racial and economic inequality by limiting the City's tax revenue.[32]

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RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE CITY GARDEN AFFORDABLE HOUSING TASK FORCE

The results of this report lay the groundwork for the development of further policy ideas and programmatic changes that could offset any adverse consequences from the demographic changes occurring in the catchment area. As the Affordable Housing Task Force and City Garden Montessori move forward with engaging community members and local officials on housing issues in the catchment area, it will remain crucial for the organization to advocate for sound approaches to affordable housing using this personal and policy evidence. As a result, this report offers several policy and program recommendations that are informed both by the findings from the community interviews in addition to the realities of the local context of St. Louis city. With these approaches, we suggest that the Affordable Housing Task Force can advocate for greater representation of affordable housing efforts and innovative partnerships in the catchment area.

ADVOCATING FOR LOCAL TAX POLICIES

Tax-Increment Financing (TIF) Reform

Tax-increment financing (TIF) has become a popular development tool for developers in many U.S. cities today, especially St. Louis. As the policy is currently used, a special district is established for new commercial or mixed-use development in urban areas deemed ‘blighted.’ Through the establishment of this special tax-financing district, expected property value increases as a result of the new development are applied as subsidies to the development costs. In the process, property taxes for the development can be frozen for up to 23 years.[33]

In St. Louis, developers are leveraging TIF through the 122 development projects currently under way, nine of which carry foregone project expenditures of over \$15 million for the life of the tax district. While the program has been successful at generating private commercial and mixed-used, market-rate residential development, TIF has the potential to be a powerful tool for the development of affordable housing in St. Louis.

TIF Housing Districts

The City of St. Louis currently allocates tax-increment financing primarily for the development of commercial or market-rate residential development. Several urban metropolitan areas have realized that TIF can be a powerful incentive for developers to also generate affordable housing options. Similar to regular TIF districts, an affordable housing TIF district is established and requires that the development within the district be primarily residential and provide housing for low- and moderate-income (LMI) households in an urban area. A strategic advantage of this kind of TIF district is that it does not fall under the same “blight” restriction that other districts do, enabling the development of affordable housing in neighborhoods of opportunity and advancing mixed-income communities.

CASE STUDY

AFFORDABLE HOUSING TIF DISTRICT IN ACTION: BRICK HILL AFFORDABLE HOUSING DEVELOPMENT DISTRICT
SOUTH PORTLAND, MAINE

Faced with rapidly increasing home values and rental costs, the State of Maine passed legislation that would incentivize municipalities to establish affordable housing districts. In 2004, the Brick Hill Affordable Housing Development District was established in South Portland, Maine as an innovative mixed-use district offering much-needed affordable housing and improvement to local services in this part of the city.[34]

- 300 total housing units (158 rental, 54 senior rental, 88 market-rate for-sale condominiums)
- Affordable at $\leq 60\%$ of AMI
- 100,000 square feet of office space for:
 - Social services
 - Day care
 - Recreational facilities for residents
- Allocation of TIF revenues for transit and public school improvements
- Life of District: 30 years
- Affordability cap: 10 years (for-sale); 30 years (rental)
- Revenues: \$14.26 - 14.9 million

TIF Allocation Fund

The City of St. Louis currently allocates new taxes that result from the development project to a special fund. This fund is used for the sole purpose of reimbursing developers. Other cities have seen the inefficiency of using these funds just for reimbursement costs, opting to set aside portions of these returns to use for affordable housing. Here, a municipality reserves a percentage of revenues from the development to cover affordable housing costs in the TIF district or elsewhere.[35]



Brick Hill Affordable Housing Development District

CASE STUDY

TIF ALLOCATION TO AFFORDABLE HOUSING IN ACTION
PORTLAND, OREGON

Portland, Oregon reaffirmed its commitment to low-income residents in 2011 when it established a reinvestment allocation of its TIF revenues to support affordable housing development in the city. Revenues generated from the city's unrestricted TIF projects are reinvested and diverted to cover a portion of costs for the the city's most at-risk and unstably housed populations. To date, Portland has seen vast improvements in the availability of affordable housing as a result of this commitment.

- 30% of all new revenues reinvested in affordable housing projects
 - 35-50% must serve households $\leq 30\%$ of AMI
 - 20-45% must serve households $\leq 31-60\%$ of AMI
 - 20-40% must fund homeownership support for households $\leq 61-100\%$ of AMI
 - Up to 10% can be used to fund development of community facilities for low-income residents
- Actual proportional allocation (as of 2012): 33%
- \$152 million in reinvestments for affordable housing
- \$29.5 million for development of Bud Clark Commons, a multi-service community resource and housing center



Bud Clark Commons

ADVOCATING FOR LOCAL HOUSING POLICIES

Maintaining Housing Stock Diversity

While precise data are difficult to access, some evidence suggests that the trend in many St. Louis neighborhoods has produced a significant number of conversions of multi-unit and multi-family units to single-family units, typically carrying with it a for-sale expectation and high price tag. In one South City neighborhood, it's estimated that these conversions, when finished, can range in price from \$200,000 to 315,000.[36]

Converting rental units to a single-family dwelling are a boon for the local housing market, but can squeeze families out of existing housing by reducing the availability of rental units and increasing surrounding costs. Furthermore, conversions reduce the density of St. Louis neighborhoods, which partially accounts for the continuing population loss in many areas between 2000-2010.[37]

Conversely, the Affordable Housing Task Force should advocate for the maintenance of inclusive zoning that reduces the number of multi-unit conversions in the catchment area. In addition, vacant and condemned properties in the FPSE area are ripe for conversions from single-family to multi-unit, an alternative that may be more feasible given the desire of cities for increased homeownership tax revenues.

ADVOCATING FOR LOCAL HOUSING POLICIES

Improving Housing Subsidy Programs

The City of St. Louis operates several programs through its Affordable Housing Commission designed to assist LMI households make necessary and emergency repairs. The programs also provide home-ownership assistance. However, the programs suffer from under-utilization and even misuse, benefiting households above expected AMI thresholds. Of the \$704,000 allocated by the city to repair and subsidy programs in 2014, just 26% of these funds went to assist households at 20% of AMI[38]. Exacerbating the City's limited funds for home repair are the extensive wait lists to obtain them, even for emergency repairs.

Lower income households in St. Louis need to be able to benefit more from this program if they are to be able to maintain their housing up to code and remain in gentrifying neighborhoods. Whether due to information or access gaps, it is important that residents in the catchment area are connected to these services and are made aware of their benefits. To achieve this, the Affordable Housing Task Force may consider advocating for three approaches to improving these programs:

1. Bridging: Linking local community agencies and neighborhood organizations to these city services for catchment area residents.
2. Establishing: City Garden may consider the development of a collaboration with grant-receiving agencies to mutually offer housing assistance benefits in the catchment area and to City Garden families. This kind of collaboration would make City Garden and its collaborator one of the only anchored agencies in the Botanical Heights neighborhood and the catchment area.
3. Income restrictions: Current income restrictions for these programs are capped at 80% of AMI (\$53,680), of which 60% of all program grants are allocated toward. The Task Force may consider pushing for the establishment of stricter income requirements for revised restrictions, possibly seeking the introduction of a 50/50 or reversed 60/40 rule. For these rules, at least 50 and 60% of program grants would be benefit households at 20% of AMI.

ADVOCATING FOR LOCAL HOUSING POLICIES

Improving Public Spaces

The resident interviews revealed a lack of social cohesion between long-term and newer residents as well as members of different racial and socioeconomic groups within the catchment area. Interestingly, out of the 82 community survey respondents, 70 stated that they interacted with their neighbors. However, the survey did not describe which neighbors interact and which do not. If long-term residents are only interacting with long-term residents, and not interacting with new residents -- and the same with racial and ethnic groups, as well as City Garden and non-City Garden families -- the community will continue to face challenges to social cohesion.

The success of bringing the community together can already be felt through small efforts into bridging the division between residents, as explained by Forest Park Southeast resident Robert:

“Old and new residents are coming together at the City Greens farmers’ market. I see long-time residents and young yuppie people interested in Mother Earth and being locavores in there—they have the same vision, they’re friendly. People also come together in the after-school programs at City Garden.”

Additionally, Angela highlighted Rise Coffee in the Grove as a place where residents mix. Rise Coffee has a pay-it-forward system that allows customers to receive coffee that has already been paid for anonymously by others and is welcoming of parents with children.

In order to contribute to the creation of sustainably diverse neighborhoods in the catchment area, the AHTF should continue to take action to foster neighborhood interactions that mirror the diverse and constructive interactions that occur within City Garden’s walls. We recommend that the AHTF promote the intermingling of the separated groups within public spaces as public spaces promote integration, accessibility, civic development, and positive interactions within communities. To fully address and overcome issues related to a deep lack of social cohesion within the catchment area, the AHTF should consider promoting public space as part of its overall strategy in the following ways:

- Reduce physical separation between neighbors by opening streets and accessways
- Designating anchors and public spaces as multi-use and accessible
- Assessing the need and desire for community centers in areas of the catchment area that do not currently have one, or do not have one that meets the community’s need
- Supporting and expanding local, small-scale retail that incorporates the skills and innovation of more residents
- Advocating that LRA land is developed considering community interests for public space



An example of a blocked roadway under Highway 44 that separates the Shaw and Botanical Heights neighborhoods.

LOOKING FORWARD:

SUSTAINING THE DIVERSITY OF THE CITY GARDEN MONTESSORI CATCHMENT AREA

In conclusion, the project team recommends that the AHTF strongly consider the above suggestions as it formulates a concrete strategy for achieving the goal of maintaining affordable housing in the City Garden catchment area. Our interviews revealed that residents are experiencing a variety of pressures that are making it more difficult for lower income families to continue living in the catchment area. There are strong market-based pressures making the neighborhoods less affordable, to be sure, but residents are also experiencing issues relating to social separation and mistrust between various neighborhood groups, as well as the application of city policies that may be negatively affecting some groups in the community while benefiting others. We recommend that the AHTF take these various political and social issues into account when conducting its advocacy work in order to work toward the creation and maintenance of truly sustainable diverse communities within the catchment area.

The project team additionally recommends that the AHTF continue to build its relationship with decision-makers at major anchor institutions in the area, particularly with Washington University. The demographic trends of decreasing African American residents and lower-income residents in the City Garden catchment neighborhoods are endangering City Garden's ability to fulfill its mission of providing excellent, individualized, culturally competent education to local students from a wide variety of backgrounds. In the City of St. Louis's landscape of drastically under-resourced and underperforming public schools, City Garden is a bright light of educational success and source of mutual acceptance and understanding among diverse groups of residents. Given the aligned educational missions of City Garden Montessori and Washington University, we hope that Washington University will work with the AHTF to develop its properties within the catchment area with an eye toward sustaining the racial and socioeconomic diversity of these neighborhoods through strengthening the affordable housing component of its development proposals. As a powerful anchor institution and real estate investor in the current and future development of the City Garden catchment area, Washington University has a unique opportunity to help shape an inclusive future for these neighborhoods and an important role to play in ensuring that as many lower income students and African American students as possible have the opportunity to benefit from a City Garden education.

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