



Streets

Property

Survey

**FINAL REPORT
TREE STREETS PROPERTY SURVEY**

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MICHAEL A. YEOMANS

NEW HAMPSHIRE COLLEGE
COMMUNITY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
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INTRODUCTION

Increasing demands on decreasing financial resources, both public and private, are causing non-profit agencies to seriously examine their opportunities and threats in the accomplishment of their goals and objectives like never before. Developing, implementing, and monitoring a strategic plan that leads the agency to the successful completion of their mission has taken on new significance.

Fundamental to the completion of the various tasks an agency undertakes, is a complete, flexible, and up to date data base. Information has a short shelf life and the need to update information quickly is becoming increasingly important. The purpose of this project was to create such a data base.

Within the delineated geographical boundaries of the Tree Streets neighborhood, residential properties range from the newly restored to the dilapidated. This neighborhood suffers from the highest crime rate in the City of Nashua, as well as associated problems. Key to the restoration of this entire area is a concerted effort by elected representatives, city officials, residents, and many others who share the common goal of a livable, safe, and healthy urban environment that contributes to the quality of life of the City as a whole.

Over the last five years the economic profile of Nashua has evolved from a deep recession to modest growth level. This current period of growth may offer opportunities to those who are prepared and vigilant of the possibilities that accompany growth. While many factors contribute to the decision making process to pursue opportunities or to let them pass, being adequately prepared to make informed decisions is critical to this process. It's envisioned this project serve as a useful tool for those charged with these responsibilities.

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The Foundation

The Greater Nashua Housing and Development Foundation, Inc., referred to herein as the Foundation, was created in 1988 in response to a housing study conducted by City of Nashua, New Hampshire, staff and others interested in providing affordable housing. The purpose of the Foundation is to provide affordable housing by acquiring, constructing, and rehabilitating single family and multifamily dwelling units and to sell, rent, or lease these properties to low income persons, families and the handicapped.

Although founded in 1988, the Foundation remained unfunded until 1994 when the New Hampshire Loan Fund provided money for two positions for one year. As a quasi-public, non-profit corporation the Foundation receives federal pass through monies in the form of community block grants from the City of Nashua. There is no direct subsidy through local tax dollars. At this time the Foundation has an Executive Director and one staff person.

Of the ten or so local and county wide agencies working to provide temporary shelter and permanent housing for low

income families and individuals, the Foundation is unique in its corporate structure. Being fully aware that the successful completion of any housing project, whether large or small, is dependent on community support and expertise, the creators of the Foundation were very specific about who could serve on the Board of Directors. They include: the Mayor and Aldermatic President from the City; five members of the Nashua Housing Authority Commission; five low income persons and one member each from the Nashua Realtors Association, Nashua Home Builders Association, the banking community, a social service agency, the clergy, and the business community. Ex-Officio members include the Director of the Nashua Community Development Department (City of Nashua), the Foundation's Executive Director and the Director of the Housing Authority. The Board has recently expanded its membership to include representatives from other local housing agencies who have expressed an interest in participating.

This mix of representation not only is highly effective for coordinating collaborative efforts, but also satisfies an important Foundation By-Law which requires the Board to "represent a diversity of technical skills to enable them to make informed, well-balanced decisions on the economic viability and social impact of its activities".

In late 1995, the Foundation relocated its' office to the

new Ash Street Community Center. Near the center of the "tree streets" neighborhood, the Foundation has immediate access to those individuals and their community leaders where they hope to have the greatest positive impact.

The Neighborhood

The study area, called the "tree streets", is located near the city center on the south side of the Nashua River. The name presumably is derived from the type of trees cut down to build these homes; Pine, Elm, Chestnut, Walnut and Ash. The housing stock dates from the late 1800's through the 1960's and many are poorly maintained. Streets are laid out on a rectangular pattern creating narrow, quarter-mile blocks.

Historically, like many other older American cities, Nashua grew up around heavy industry and manufacturing. Within the tree street neighborhood worker housing was erected creating high density areas near the sources of employment. From the days of the mill workers through the present the tree streets remain static in terms of new development. With up to 75% of the dwelling units being rented, this helps to explain the neighborhood's transient population.

According to the 1990 census, the majority population in

this area is white. Hispanics total about 15% with the remainder comprised of other ethnic groups. However, in reality, this area has a large Hispanic population which may in fact be double the white population. It's believed the tree streets supply a large number of "new residents" with transitional housing.

On approximately 10% of the City's land area, high residential densities; poor housing stock; an almost invisible ethnic population; and high transience; combine to create conditions which generates the highest crime rates in the city. Because of this, the City has created its first community police substation within the Ash Street Community Center. The substation requires limited financial resources, offers a visible police presence and provides a faster response time to criminal events.

According to Nashua police, when northern Massachusetts communities began community policing, in addition to other strong interdictive crime enforcement, this caused a displacement of gangs and others involved in selling drugs and associated crime. Because of these intensive efforts, those individuals moved north across the state line and relocated to New Hampshire's largest city, Manchester. Following the example of successful police efforts in Massachusetts, Manchester police reacted to this influx of criminal activity and began similar programs. The result

of these efforts was again to displace these individuals; this time to Nashua. As noted above, the tree streets are a major recipient of this inflow of activity.

Problem Statement

Because of a large number of deteriorated housing units; a high number of absentee landlords and generally unclean conditions; an existing high crime rate; and an invisible minority population; within the next five (5) years if conditions within the tree streets neighborhood are not improved the crime rate will increase sharply. This will lead to further deteriorating conditions within the neighborhood and negatively affect the larger community by increasing the crime rate over a larger geographical area and by siphoning off declining public resources.

Goal Statement

Within the next five (5) years the following goals are to be achieved by the Foundation: 1) Increase home ownership through the creation of affordable housing; 2) Reduce density through demolition of non-habitable housing stock; 3) Actively involve absentee land owners in the maintenance and upgrading of rental properties; 4) Identify housing stock which is suitable for rehabilitation; 5) Assist homeowners with home maintenance

who do not have the financial resources to maintain their property; 6) Improve the general appearance of the neighborhood through improvements to the street environment such as tree planting and garbage collection; and 7) Purchase and consolidate land for outdoor sports such as soccer, baseball and basketball.

Project Product Description

The primary thrust of this project focused on data collection through field survey and a municipal data base, and its display in a flexible, computerized format. Working within the geographical boundaries prescribed by the Director of the Foundation, property records of the subject properties were examined and specific data extracted. Properties were also photographed in standard photo and slide format. Each property in the survey is linked to the primary data base, field form with photo attached and base map for positive identification and location. Please see the Appendices for examples.

Methodology

There are two primary places where data collection and its organization occur; in the office and the field. In the office, data collection, its interpretation and display, and problem solving relating to these tasks, always

present numerous challenges. The sources of data must be located as there are usually multiple locations. For this project I relied upon municipal records and mapping for the base data.

As probably in the case of most data bases, the information required to be collected is scattered amongst various screens or levels. Before I began the search/collection phase however, I prepared a draft form of the data fields that I felt were relevant to the project. This draft form was then submitted to the Director for review and comment. Based on the comments received, the form was revised accordingly.

Having access to, and the time to become familiar with, an extensive data base can be a significant problem. The data source will most likely be a computer terminal in a public building. This will necessitate using the terminal for several hours at a time over several days, when available. This means that someone without immediate access to such a system will have to make several trips to the data source location.

Even after the data is collected, questions will arise due to inconsistencies and other discrepancies discovered in the data itself, as well as when this data is compared to what's found in the field. For example, two properties

will share the same street address in the records, or house numbers will not agree with ownership records. This fact did not become apparent to me until I tried to match my photos/house address log with the tax map and parcel number.

A great deal of thought should be given to how the information will ultimately be displayed. For this project I utilized a spread sheet linked to a form list. This was a standard configuration in my software and worked fairly well; but, not without many compromises. Unfortunately, unless you have experience with the software it's impossible to foresee all of this at the outset and only becomes apparent later in the process. See Appendix D.

It goes without saying the size of the data base being created is directly dependent upon the number of data fields. How all of this fits on a page, and other considerations, has to be dealt with as the data base is built. An element of its display not only is its usefulness, but whether it's intended the data base be manipulated. While this may be a reasonable assumption that it will be, the end user and their intended use of the data is important to know. In other words, there should be no misunderstanding about the limitations, if any, of the final product. The sophistication of the software will have a lot to do with this. Also, it's

critical that the final product be compatible with the receiver's computer operating system and software.

Field work presents other problems not unlike those on the office side of data collection. In this project it was necessary to plan out the most efficient route for photographic purposes. An important consideration was the time of day and the day itself which would be the most advantageous to unobstructed photographs. Since this project was a housing survey, minimizing photographic interference from vehicular and pedestrian traffic was necessary. This is especially true for high density neighborhoods. Another factor considered was street parking. For these reasons I selected a cloudless, Sunday morning at dawn for photographic work. As expected, moving traffic, parked cars and pedestrians were minimal. Mounted on my bicycle I was able shoot both sides of the streets surveyed from each street center line. In this manner it only took about 1.5 hours to photograph over 90 residential structures through five city blocks.

Faced with the problem of reconciling three rolls of photographs with their associated data base forms, as I photographed each property I wrote down the address which corresponded to the picture number. Although I started with a master property list, after the pictures were developed I found I had gaps in the list which

necessitated more time collecting property record data.

During this photographic secession I also realized that the time of day had profound effects on picture quality. While the initial photos were acceptable, a low sun rising on the eastern horizon cast long, dark shadows on the subject properties. This may not have been quite as pronounced if the alignment of the street were more in line with the orientation of the sun. In order to get the least amount of shadow a mid-day shoot would have been required. This would, of course, have defeated the reasons for the early morning shoot as noted above. Probably the way to deal with this would be to wait for an overcast day. It's difficult to wait for the right conditions with rigid constraints. Windows of opportunity can be limited by many factors.

While I was reasonably pleased with the outcome of this effort I failed to get control over my projected costs. Again, it's difficult to think through every detail when you have never done something like this before. What I discovered was that film processing is very expensive. So expensive in fact that it was necessary to rephotograph every property in the survey. The cost to rephotograph and develop was about one-third the cost of having one picture per slide developed.

Conclusion

There are many elements involved in the successful conclusion of any major undertaking, regardless of the nature of the project. Thorough planning and execution are critical; and finally implementation. At this last stage, implementation, quite often are heard the loudest complaints. The most common complaint being that there was no implementation. The plan, project, data base, etc. never goes beyond the "bookshelf".

The "why" portion of this phenomena is quite easy to answer. Implementation usually involves a long term commitment; money; staff; political support, both internal and external; community support; and others. In larger organizations, these components will be available to a greater or lesser degree. In a small organization, such as the Foundation, each one of these can be a significant barrier.

You will recall from the first part of this report the Foundation has one professional employee and one assistant. This alone limits the opportunities to undertake many endeavors. The Foundation also operates in the community as a whole and is therefore not limited to just the Tree Streets neighborhood. What this means is that priorities set by the Foundation are based on issues

in a broad community context. One such priority is the Foundation's current efforts focused on saving a multi-unit housing development for senior citizens. This building is located in another part of the City and is endanger of reverting to fair market rental rates.

Given this organization's small size, limited resources and higher priorities, measuring the immediate results of this project is not possible. In many respects this project has all of the trade marks of one of those planning efforts which invariably ends up on the bookshelf never to see the light of day. While I admit this is a distinct possibility, I should point out that the purpose of this project was to gather the base data necessary in order to do the work which lay ahead, irrespective of when that occurs. Working within the limitations of the software, the data base was designed to be updated with minimal effort. Therefore, like many studies that are time sensitive, this work product will not permanently expire.

One of the most interesting events which occurred during this project was not associated directly with the project at all. The task given to us was actually an assignment in Organizational Management. The assignment was to identify the steps, time and persons involved in a strategic plan for the organization. The difficulty with this assignment was that in the case of the Foundation I knew that its

goals and priorities were much broader than just the Tree Streets neighborhood. I set about developing a strategic plan for the neighborhood anyway, specific to my project only, and submitted it for the Director's and community residents review and comment. An important result of this small effort was that I began to develop a better feel of how the community residents felt about those issues which were the most important to them. One question I also sought to answer was how close was the work I was engaged in related to those community issues.

With regards to the responses to the draft plan, not too surprising were responses which identified various issues unrelated to my project. I say not too surprising for two reasons. The first is because the circulation of the plan was very limited due to time constraints and the assignment requirements. The second reason, and I feel the most telling, is that most people react to immediate problems that are visible, understandable and suggest simple solutions. An example of this is trash collection. Because of the high number of rental units, their low rental value, and high turnover rate, this neighborhood requires two to three times the normal trash pickup days as compared to other parts of the City. What people see is trash and that fact that it's only picked up once a week. What they don't necessarily see is the potential opportunity to remove an uninhabitable or poorly

maintained structure that could be used as a collection center to help ease the burdens placed on the street for storage. The same holds true for off street parking and play areas as well.

One other important result was that putting something in writing concerning goals and objectives had never been done before. Having a document in hand to review and discuss has forced those involved to begin to think about the long term future, as opposed to the short term future, of the Foundation and its priorities. The Director has a very clear vision of where she needs to go and the Board of Directors is otherwise supportive. However, her vision is not on paper.

One other barrier I see is that representation from the City is not sufficient. Not every neighborhood has the kinds of problems found in the Tree Streets and therefore does not demand the same level of involvement on the municipal level. As a consequence this area does not get the kind of municipal attention it requires to facilitate the information exchange necessary to continue to make progress on the various issues and explore opportunities.

In my mind the near term, future work of the Foundation is clear. The refinement of the strategic plan and time line for implementation should be a top priority of the

Director, the Board of Directors and community residents. Since many of the tasks identified in the draft plan start with the property survey, the completion of this work product early in the process will enable those involved to move forward rapidly to the next steps. A two person staff with few volunteers; limited neighborhood involvement; and limited funding will continue to slow progress, but these problems can be worked on. It's unrealistic, given these constraints, to expect major changes at this time. However, I believe that a strong technical data base is critical to any success, regardless of how small, and that my work product will facilitate the achievement of the Foundation's goals. I also believe that progress is incremental and that many small steps are reasonable and necessary to fulfill these goals.

One final issue concerns the potential dislocation of individuals and families from their residence as a result of the Foundation's purchase and demolition of a building. In this regard I have two comments. First of all, in every project that has been undertaken by the Foundation, and other housing providers in Nashua as well, suitable alternative residences have been found near the location of their current residence. Secondly, if a building is not suitable for habitation for any reason, government has a legal and moral obligation to make sure that it's not occupied even if it means putting people in a shelter.