

# Heath Street Revitalization

## CED Project Report

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# Heath Street Revitalization

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## **Introduction and Background**

This Project developed as a result of the parallel thinking of two unrelated community organizations. Both the Back of the Hill Community Development Corporation and the Hennigan Community Center Advisory Board perceived that Heath Street, a major thoroughfare in our neighborhood, badly lacked attention from either the owners of its empty lots and old industrial buildings or the city. The condition of the street was directly affecting the quality of life of residents of the Back of the Hill and of students and teachers at the Hennigan School, constituent groups of those two organizations, and of course the quality of life of other area residents also.

Heath Street is the dividing line between Jamaica Plain and the Mission Hill section of Roxbury, two neighborhoods in Boston. As a boundary, it seems to belong to neither Roxbury nor Jamaica Plain. It has not been included in the development plans of either community. It is split between two police districts, and between two city council districts. The street needs repaving, streetlights, and sidewalk repair; it lacks trees and trash containers. Buildings need to be cleaned of graffiti; the vacant lots need to be cleaned and maintained, gardened, or developed.

The southern side of the street is occupied primarily by the Bromley-Heath public housing development at one end and the Hennigan Elementary School at the other. Both of these institutions are presently undergoing construction: Bromley-Heath has received funding for what will eventually be a total renovation, and the playground of the Hennigan has been redesigned and is being rebuilt with funding from the Schoolyard Initiative, a consortium of foundations. In contrast, the northern side of the street is an amalgamation of poorly-maintained triple deckers, light industry, and abandoned lots; all the lots are owned either by an agency of the city of Boston or by Ruggles Baptist Church.

Ruggles Baptist Church was once actually housed on Ruggles Street in Mission Hill. Today, it occupies a building on Park Drive in Boston, on the border of Brookline. The church owned various pieces of property on the Back of the Hill, and when the Board of Overseers first contemplated relocating the church, they planned to build the

new church there. To this end, they demolished a number of derelict three-decker houses, to clear property for their project. For reasons of expense, the church changed its mind and decided that, rather than build, they would purchase an empty church from another congregation. Many of the empty lots created by Ruggles Baptist on the residential streets of the Hill were sold to residents of the neighborhood through a collaborative program of the church and the Back of the Hill Community Development Corporation, the “owner-builder” program. Residents were sold land at a low price in exchange for a commitment to build housing which would be owner-occupied, and would also contain at least one affordable rental unit. However, the lots the church owns along Heath Street were never developed, and remain today overgrown with weeds and trash.

Late in the winter of 1995, into the spring of 1996, the Back of the Hill Community Development Corporation Board of Directors began to discuss the possibility of initiating development work on Heath Street. At the same time, the Hennigan Community Center Advisory Board was discussing the need to rid the empty lots across from the schoolyard of prostitution and drug activity. As a member of the Back of the Hill Community Development Corporation Board, I attended meetings with the Hennigan Community Center Advisory Board, and helped form the group which has since evolved into Heath Street Neighbors. Initial members included representatives from the Hennigan Center Advisory Board, the BOTH Community Development Corporation, the Neighborhood Development Corporation of Jamaica Plain, and the Bromley-Heath Tenant Management Corporation. At present, the number of organizational members has grown, and there are members who are unaffiliated individual members from the community. It is in these organizations and individuals shared interest to improve the appearance and functioning of Heath Street.

Heath Street is an unattractive street that people drive down as quickly as they can. Businesses have no incentive to invest in our neighborhood. People feel unsafe and stay off the street. If Heath Street is left as it is, drug activity and prostitution will continue. The street will serve as a barrier, dividing the Back of the Hill from Hyde Square and Bromley-Heath. The school will serve as a wall between neighborhoods rather than a place of coming together.

Many groups of people are affected by what happens on Heath Street, including area residents, the children, teachers, and parents at the Hennigan Elementary School, people using the Hennigan Community Center, the small businesses on the street (a Laundromat and a bodega on the short block between the school and Bromley-Heath, and a pizza parlor across from Bromley-Heath) as well as the larger businesses (Lenox-Martel, which makes beverage syrups for restaurants and other institutions, Hampden Auto, an auto parts refurbisher, and Fine Arts Express, an art storage facility), and people working at the VA Hospital or living in the Jefferson Schoolhouse condominiums. Certainly the condition of the street affects drivers, but perhaps even more it affects pedestrians and cyclists, who travel at a slower rate of speed.

The growth of Heath Street Neighbors into a broad neighborhood coalition which will be an advocate for improvements to the street, and the process by which this growth takes place, has been the focus of my Project.

### *Summary*

Since July of 1996, Heath Street Neighbors (at first under the auspices of the Hennigan Community Center Advisory Board, and later as an independent group) has been working to involve the broader community in improving aspects of Heath Street. We began with the intent to fix some immediate problems - the presence of prostitution and drug-dealing across from the elementary school playground - and have developed a shared intention to make more permanent positive changes to the street.

The activities of the organization have grown from short-term activities such as organizing clean-ups and collecting signatures on petitions, to activities with more long-term objectives, such as scheduling meetings with departments of the city and the community to begin to discuss traffic patterns and street design. Heath Street Neighbors has involved residents in hands-on activities (such as cleaning the vacant lots) and in less direct actions (such as signing a petition), and we have done our best to inform neighborhood residents of our activities at every step, inviting their participation.

However, the membership of the group continues to be a mix of representatives of various local organizations and individuals who are inclined, with or without a group behind them, to call the city and make demands. These people are clearly active members of the community, but they are not necessarily people who work well in groups, or see the need to act in concert with a group. Their actions (or lack of action) imply that not all members of Heath Street Neighbors agree that broader community participation is needed. Suggestions to go door-knocking, or flyer the area for meetings, have not been accepted. My objective of bringing in the community at large has been somewhat difficult to achieve.

Despite our shortcomings, in the last 16 months we have reached several of our objectives, or have made steps towards doing so. The vacant lots are clean, and we are meeting with a representative of Ruggles Baptist Church to discuss options for the disposition of the empty lots they own. We are working with Bromley-Heath Tenant Management Corporation to develop a satisfactory design concept for the troublesome rotary at General Heath Square, and will be meeting with the city to try to get their commitment to include the work in the capital budget. We have held a community meeting; the residents who attended, hearing of all the large and small improvements underway or planned, have a new view of the street and of its potential.

Heath Street Neighbors will last long after this Community Economic Development Project has been presented; the project of revitalizing Heath Street has many years yet to run.

### **The Project: Heath Street Revitalization**

#### **Problem Statement**

*If no solution is found, Heath St., rather than linking the three neighborhoods adjacent to it, will continue to attract drug activities, prostitution and abandoned cars, and an area which has been working to develop affordable housing and small businesses will suffer continued disinvestment and deterioration.*

## Problem Assessment

Heath Street cuts between Hyde Square in Jamaica Plain and the back of Mission Hill, in Roxbury. Although it is used by both communities, it has not been included in the development plans of either one. It is split between two police districts, and between two city council districts. The infrastructure has been left unattended, and the street needs repaving, streetlights, and sidewalk repair. The street is unattractive: it lacks trees and the industrial buildings are covered with graffiti. The vacant lots accumulate trash and are unproductive, rather than providing housing or stores, or parks and gardens.

People drive down Heath Street as quickly as they can, and traffic is a problem. Heath Street serves as a link between two bicycle paths, yet does not have a bike lane, and can be hazardous to cycle. There is a lack of crosswalks, and there are few places where it feels safe to cross the street. There is a subway stop at one end of Heath Street (Jackson Sq.) and a trolley stop at the other, but people feel unsafe walking to and from the trains, especially at night. Lack of pedestrian activity and a perceived lack of safety give businesses little incentive to invest in our neighborhood. According to the assessment of the economic development director at Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Development Corporation, despite the population density of Bromley-Heath and the Back of the Hill, Heath Street lacks the foot traffic to support retail businesses.<sup>1</sup> There are not the retail businesses to support industry (places to bank, places to buy lunch, etc.). There is, however, a fair amount of activity around the few retail establishments that do exist. We must expand on this; if we do not, and Heath Street is left as it is, drug activity and prostitution will continue. Heath Street will serve as a barrier, dividing our neighborhoods rather than bringing them together.

Heath Street is utilized by a variety of people. This group includes area residents, a diverse group of Latinos, people of African, Caribbean, European, and Asian descent;

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<sup>1</sup> There is, in fact, a lack of foot traffic, but even should foot traffic increase, the population in the area may not have the economic ability to support new commercial construction. Any additional retail on Heath Street must be newly built, as we have empty lots to deal with, and not abandoned buildings. The cost of new construction can be as high as \$125/sq. ft., and there are no financial subsidies for building stores as there can be for building housing.

working class, middle class, and “lumpen”<sup>2</sup>; as I mention above, it includes the children who attend the Hennigan Elementary School and their teachers and parents; people attending programs at the Hennigan Community Center, using the laundromat or shopping at the bodega on the short block between the school and the public housing development. The street is used by the workers and customers of the larger businesses on Heath St., by the staff, workers, and patients at the VA Hospital, and by residents of the Jefferson School condominiums.

Everyone to whom we have spoken in the community agrees that along Heath Street safety is a matter for concern. As a result, safety issues are a major focus of Heath Street Neighbors, and thus the issues addressed in my Project are primarily concerned with safety. Better lighting and a more pleasing appearance will increase pedestrian use. I believe that there is a direct connection between the greater use of a street and greater safety on that street, and a connection between greater safety (real or perceived) and increased potential for retail development. My assumption is that residents of the communities adjacent to Heath Street will see that improving the street in various ways will make it safer, and that therefore improvement is in their interests. My hope is that some of them will be willing to become involved in making change.

## **Project Goals**

*The Hennigan Advisory Board, galvanized by the allegation that prostitutes were using the lots across from the school's playground, invited several other local community groups to a meeting to discuss possible courses of action. Representatives of the BOTH CDC, Bromley-Heath TMC and JP NDC responded. We agreed that the first thing to do was to clean up the lots, to increase visibility and discourage drug users and prostitutes. We also agreed that a clean-up was only a short-term solution; that lots once cleared will become overgrown again, and that for a long-term solution we need to work to develop alternative uses for the empty lots.*

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<sup>2</sup> I use this term in the Marxist sense, to denote those without jobs or education and without much in the way of prospects. However, I want to be clear that by “lumpen” I do *not* mean all recipients of welfare or other forms of public assistance. There may be a more accurate term for the chronically unemployed, or unable to escape from the grip of drug dependence, but if there is, I do not know it.



*The goal of the group now meeting, and of this Project, is to create a community economic development plan for Heath St. Included in the goal for this project is to encourage and facilitate a collaborative effort of the participating community organizations which actively involves members of the three impacted communities. This effort should contribute to the ongoing process of reclaiming our neighborhoods, building a sense of shared community and "neighborhood pride" within the BOTH, Hyde/Jackson Sq. and Bromley-Heath communities.*

The wind blows down Heath Street, trapping garbage in the empty lots. At night, the lots are places where drug deals are concluded; prostitutes do business in cars parked on the side of intersecting roads. Residences owned by absentee landlords are deteriorating. Bromley-Heath, which borders half of one side of the street, is undergoing a massive renovation, in stages. The Hennigan Elementary School, at the other end of Heath Street, is rebuilding its playground with the assistance of the Schoolyard Initiative, a coalition of foundations.

The Back of the Hill Community Development Corporation has, in the past 20 years, helped to add approximately 200 units of housing to the neighborhood, many of them affordable condominiums. The Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Development Corporation built the Hyde Square Cooperatives in the neighborhood, between Heath Street and Centre Street. (See "Current Conditions", below, for more detail on development activities.)

Heath Street is in a transitional area, an area in which there are many improvements taking place - but Heath Street itself is not being improved. Our goal is to see Heath Street rebuilt as Bromley-Heath and the Hennigan playground are being rebuilt, to see the street developed much as the surrounding neighborhoods have been developed. At the first community clean-up, we cleared a five-parcel lot of undergrowth, trash, and small "weed" trees. It continues to collect trash, but it will be a long time before the trees grow back. With work, Heath Street can be a "main street" in our community, as it was sixty years ago. It will then invite us to cross the street into our neighboring communities.

Bromley-Heath plans to have its main entrance on Heath Street. If Heath Street Neighbors achieves its goals, Heath Street will be a street on which people will walk and cycle without fear, which will be well-lit and attractive, and along which cars will drive at a reasonable speed. The street will become more attractive to businesses and developers.

Once we have met our goal of revitalizing Heath Street., our task will be to keep out speculators, and maintain the integrity of our community. It has been a pattern for Boston neighborhoods to fall into disrepair, be reclaimed by their communities, and then be overrun with real estate speculators, who drive out the residents with increased rents and inflated housing prices. The Real Estate section of the Boston Sunday Globe of November 30, 1997, headlines “Roxbury is Hot!”, proclaiming Roxbury to be the next South End of the city. The South End is known for its history of gentrification, and continues to become increasingly expensive. Mission Hill, and all of Roxbury, will have to be organized and vigilant if those of us who live here now are to be able to afford to remain here.

## **Objectives**

The Hennigan Community Center Advisory Board, acting on information that prostitution and drug-dealing was taking place across the street from the school, invited several other local community groups to a meeting to discuss possible courses of action. Representatives of the Back of the Hill Community Development Corporation , Bromley-Heath Tenant Management Corporation and Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Development Corporation responded. We agreed that the first task at hand was to clear the lots, to increase visibility and discourage drug users and prostitutes. All agreed that a clean-up was only a short-term solution. Lots once cleared will become overgrown again. For a long-term solution we will need to create a workplan for the development of alternative uses for the empty lots.

Toward this end, the work of my Project is to encourage and facilitate a collaborative effort of the participating community organizations. This has meant coordinating outreach, facilitating meetings, encouraging participation, and actively

involving members of the three impacted communities. This will be part of an ongoing process of reclaiming our neighborhoods. Each community has worked to build a sense of neighborhood pride. If these three adjoining neighborhoods can begin to see themselves as parts of one larger community, and build a sense of *shared* community and "neighborhood pride", the Back of the Hill, Hyde/Jackson Square and Bromley-Heath communities together can be a strong force for change. The creation of a strong, community-based organization is an important part of achieving a CED approach to development.

The ultimate goal of Heath Street Neighbors is to turn Heath Street into a user-friendly neighborhood street. Specific objectives include working toward the redevelopment of the empty parcels of land along Heath Street, getting traffic patterns improved and calmed through the use of traffic signs and redesigns of two dangerous intersections, getting better lighting along the street, especially in the rotary area, and improving the general appearance of the street with tree plantings, graffiti cleanings, the repair of run-down properties, and the installation of trash receptacles.

I do not expect to have accomplished all this during my participation in the CED program. As I write this report, we are well on the way to establishing a community organization that spans Heath Street. My immediate objective is to have this organization, Heath Street Neighbors, firmly in place by the spring of 1998. Pressure from this group has gained us attention from the various city departments that will be involved in doing the work we envision. The Department of Public Works and the Boston Transportation Department have tentatively begun to consider a rotary redesign. Discussions have begun with a representative of Ruggles Baptist Church about the disposition of the vacant lots they own on Heath St. We have been approached by several agencies - the Boston 400 program of the Boston Redevelopment Authority, and the Parks Commission, for example - to be part of their community process and ensure representation from the neighborhoods.

As a related objective, I expect to develop and maintain a good working relationship with the Tenant Management Corporation at Bromley-Heath. Participation

by Bromley-Heath in the plans we develop for Heath St., especially at the rotary, is crucial to our success.

### **Purpose / Product**

At the start of the CED program, I envisioned a rather grandiose product. I foresaw that by the end of the Project period Heath Street Neighbors would have arrived at a development proposal for the abandoned properties along Heath St. This proposal would have been developed through a participatory process involving residents of all three affected neighborhoods. My contract states that we would have identified and begun to work with development partners and financial backers, and would be in a position to set into place a plan for an actual development process.

By several months into the program, it was clear that the final product I had optimistically predicted could only be realized after several years of steady effort. I trimmed down my expectations, and expanded my timeline, and now anticipate that at the close of this Project period there will be in place a fledgling organization, bringing together residents from all three neighborhoods to discuss long-term plans for Heath Street, and to tackle short-term problems. We may have reached an agreement with the city about installing lighting and improving traffic patterns. Heath Street Neighbors will, at least, be known to people in the community and to representatives of various city agencies.

This is only the very beginning of a development process.

### **Activities**

To achieve the goals of this Project, I have engaged in the following activities: Since July of 1996, we have had regular monthly meetings. In March, 1997, the group began to meet independently of the Hennigan Community Center Advisory Board, and in April we decided to name the group Heath Street Neighbors. I have maintained a phone list of both "active" and "inactive" "members", and four of us - all from the Back of the Hill Community Development Corporation - make reminder calls for all meetings.

With others in the group, I organized two neighborhood clean-ups, the first in October of 1996, the second in May of 1997. The office of our State Representative (Kevin Fitzgerald) arranged a third clean-up with CityYear in October of 1997. After the first community clean-up, I drafted a survey to identify what issues people in the neighborhood saw as priorities. We circulated the survey over a period of several months (throughout the winter of 1996-97). People involved in survey distribution included the manager of a check-cashing establishment on Centre Street, the manager of Lenox-Martel (a business on Heath St.), and the Hyde Square Cooperative Housing Board of Directors. Almost 200 surveys were completed, and the results tabulated in March. (Copies of both the petition and the summarized results are attached to this report.)

In May, we wrote a petition requesting that the city install additional street lighting at the rotary end of Heath Street. We collected over 80 signatures. Shortly after submitting the petition to the Commissioner of the Department of Public Works, an engineer from the Department of Transportation (Richard Loring) agreed to schedule a walk-through of the street with us. After the walk-through, at Mr. Loring's recommendation, I sent in an addendum to the petition, requesting that the installation of lighting take place in conjunction with a redesign of the rotary at the five-way intersection of Parker and Heath Streets, called General Heath Square<sup>3</sup>, which poses many traffic hazards.

At the end of the summer, I began working with the Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Development Corporation to plan a series of community meetings to develop a "master plan" for Heath Street. Heath Street Neighbors organized the first community meeting for October 21, 1997. We scheduled several people to speak on the various improvements taking place or planned to take place along Heath Street.<sup>4</sup> Another committee member designed a flyer for the meeting which I had translated into Spanish. We had 2000 copies printed, and leafleted the three neighborhoods concerned (Hyde Square., the Back of the Hill. and Bromley-Heath). The meeting was attended by over 30 people.

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<sup>3</sup> A map of the rotary area and information about General Heath are attached to this report.

<sup>4</sup> See attached agenda for the October 21st meeting.

One of the issues discussed at the community meeting on October 21 was the traffic rotary at General Heath Square. In the presentation made by a representative from Bromley-Heath Tenant Management Corporation, we saw that in the Boston Housing Authority master plan for the renovation of the development they had included plans to close off a part of Heath Street between the rotary and the sidewalk along Bromley-Heath. This would effectively eliminate the rotary by absorbing it into the adjacent strip of land. The presentation provoked some comments - not all friendly - as the rest of the community had not been involved in the development of this scheme. A small group of us had a follow-up meeting with Tenant Management Corporation staff at which they put forth the reasoning behind their proposed design. We did not reach agreement on the design, but did agree that the fate of the rotary is an issue on which we need to work together.

### **Expected Project Product and Actual Results**

#### **Project Product**

*By the end of this project period the group will have arrived at a development proposal for the abandoned properties along Heath Street through a participatory process involving residents of all three affected neighborhoods. We will have identified and be working with development partners and financial backers. We will be in a position to set into place a plan for an actual development process.*

For the Project to be successful, as mentioned above, I anticipated the formation of stable group, with active involvement by Bromley-Heath, the Hennigan Community Center, Hyde Square residents, and Back of the Hill residents. I expected to have negotiations underway to develop the empty lots, and to have development partners and financial backers identified.

There is at this time no development proposal on the table; however, we have seen the formation of a community organization that will lead to a planning process. This group grew out of the Hennigan Community Center Advisory Board meetings to discuss

the need to improve Heath Street. These meetings led to a larger group holding regular meetings to discuss concerns about the vacant lots facing the playground of the Hennigan Elementary School.

Prostitutes were conducting business in the wooded areas, and drug activity was also occurring. The first project we took on, in October of 1996, was a clean-up of the lots. We scheduled it to coincide with the CityYear Servathon, and turned out about 30 volunteers from the neighborhood. We contacted the Ruggles Church and the city of Boston's Public Facilities Department<sup>5</sup> (which also owns property along Heath Street) and scheduled a walk through the area. The city agreed to clean up their properties; they also agreed, upon the request of our State Representative's office<sup>6</sup>, to lend us a wood chipper and other tools for the Servathon work day.

The expanded Community Center group then decided to design a survey (see attachments) to identify priority issues on Heath Street. The survey was finalized in November of 1996, and typed up in English and Spanish. Three hundred copies went out into the neighborhoods adjacent to Heath Street: the Back of the Hill, Hyde Square, and the Bromley-Heath Housing Development.

By March of 1997, we had split off from the Community Center Advisory Board and created Heath Street Neighbors as an independent community organization. The group includes some individual residents of the community, and members of the Back of the Hill Community Development Corporation Board, the Community Center staff, Urban Edge Community Development Corporation, the Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Development Corporation, Bromley-Heath Tenant Management Corporation, the Jefferson Schoolhouse Condominiums Board of Directors, and State Representative Kevin Fitzgerald's office. Also involved, but not regularly attending meetings, are representatives of the Boston Neighborhood Resource Center, which has put forth a proposal to develop an abandoned transfer station on property owned by Ruggles Baptist Church, Ruggles Baptist Church, the Boston Transportation Department, the Department

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<sup>5</sup> PFD has recently had its name changed to the Department of Neighborhood Development.

<sup>6</sup> State Representative Kevin Fitzgerald and his aide, Richard Giordano, have been supportive and helpful to Heath Street Neighbors on an ongoing basis.

of Public Works, the Mayor's Office of Neighborhood Services, and the offices of City Councilors Maura Hennigan and Tom Keane.

Groups actively involved in the organization tend to be interested in Heath Street where it abuts their building or area of interest. (For example, Bromley-Heath Tenant Management Corporation is most interested in the end of Heath Street at the rotary; the Jefferson Condo Association is most concerned about the VA Hospital plans, parking on their section of Heath Street, and the billboard across the street from their building.) We now meet monthly, and Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Development Corporation is interested in working with us to possibly develop housing on the vacant land. Perhaps by next year we will have a development proposal in hand!

### **Current Conditions**

The neighborhood is not without assets. There are strong community organizations in the area, with many accomplishments to their credit. Bromley-Heath is currently undergoing major renovations. In Hyde Square, the Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Development Corporation recently built a scattered-site, 41-unit, tenant-run housing cooperative; they have also purchased and rehabbed several houses in the area and sold them to qualifying residents as affordable housing. The Back of the Hill Community Development Corporation has, in the past 15 years, constructed or rehabbed twenty affordable residences, both condominium and rental units, participated in the Owner-Builder program with Ruggles Baptist Church, and constructed a building with 125 rental units for the elderly and disabled (100 South Huntington). Back of the Hill Community Development Corporation also provided support to the Bricklayer's development project of 160 condominiums, half of which sold at "market rate" and half at "affordable" prices.

The neighborhood is easily accessible to downtown: there are stops for the Orange Line (subway) and the Green Line (trolley) of the MBTA. Heath Street connects two heavily-used bike paths, one along the Orange Line corridor park, the other along the Jamaicaway. The population is extremely diverse, in terms of ethnicity, religion, and income.



Despite its assets, this is a part of the city that has not attracted a lot of city money. Heath Street is poorly paved, the trolley tracks, and the broken pavement around them on South Huntington (intersecting Heath Street at its western end), constantly catch the wheels of the wheelchairs of the residents of 100 South Huntington and the wheels of passing cyclists, and there are stop signs, crosswalks, and “no parking” signs missing. The city-owned vacant lots were finally cleaned on the day the community turned out to clear the lots facing the Hennigan Elementary School, after pressure from the community, but are once again collecting wind-blown trash.

When we first contacted the Mayor’s Office of Neighborhood Services, they shuffled us from liaison to liaison, none eager to claim responsibility for Heath Street. We now have a decent working relationship with the Mayor’s liaison for Jamaica Plain.

### **Desired Conditions**

We want Heath Street to be a more friendly, neighborhood street. Residents should be able to cross it without dodging speeding cars; buildings and land should be clean and attractive; the street should be well-lit and well-used.

Conditions on the street will change as we persuade the city to spend money and effort repairing the infrastructure; as the infrastructure improves, businesses and developers will be attracted to the area.<sup>7</sup> Both Hyde-Jackson Square and Brigham Circle - the two business districts on either side of Mission Hill - have been designated as “Main Streets” and will receive funding for physical improvements.<sup>8</sup> Heath Street, lying between these two designees, is ripe for city improvement. We envision pedestrian activity and new housing and shops that will make the street safer and more attractive. Once Heath Street is more inviting, the Hennigan Community Center will be more widely used, and therefore will be better-funded by its parent organization, the Boston

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<sup>7</sup> Heath Street Neighbors is already tentatively discussing development prospects, and is committed to keeping control of the process. We have been working with Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Development Corporation from our inception to ensure that a non-profit, community-based development approach is maintained.

<sup>8</sup> Main Streets funding is awarded to qualifying commercial areas by the city, and the competition is fairly stiff. Once selected, neighborhoods form a Main Streets committee to manage the money within the neighborhood. Often, it is used to “beautify” a commercial area - adding flowerpots, installing trashcans, and lending money to shopowners to fix up their shop facades.

Community Centers. Members of the Hyde Square, Back of the Hill, and Bromley-Heath communities will see each other as neighbors and not as strangers.

### **Major Outputs if Successfully Completed**

As stated above, in my original contract I anticipated that this Project would see the formation of stable group, with active involvement by Bromley-Heath, Community Center, Hyde Square residents, and Back of the Hill residents. I expected to have negotiations underway to develop the empty lots, and to have development partners and financial backers identified. Using my original expectations as a measure of success, my Project has not been successful at all.

However, I have achieved several objectives essential to the eventual success of the Project as originally conceived. Now, I have a more realistic concept of what “outputs” are possible in the length of time available to the CED Project - and I can use these to measure my relative success. The formation of a stable group with active involvement by Bromley-Heath Tenant Management Corporation, Bromley-Heath residents, Hennigan Community Center board members, Hyde Square residents, and Back of the Hill residents would be one result that would indicate success. A second would be to have a redesign of the rotary in the works, and a third would be the beginning of broad community discussions of ideas and proposals for the empty lots.

### **Outputs Fully Achieved**

None of these outputs has been fully achieved, although they are very close to fruition. Heath Street Neighbors is growing into a viable and credible community organization. There is a core group that frequently, if not always, attends meetings. We have met with Bromley-Heath Tenant Management Corporation to discuss the development of a mutually satisfactory redesign of the rotary, and we agree that community members from both sides of the rotary need to support the plan. The city is aware of our concern and appears to be willing to work with us.

## **Outputs Partially Achieved**

Heath Street Neighbors consists of a fairly constant group of individuals from existing community groups and a few not from groups but independently active in the community. I would like to see the core, stable group a little larger than it is at present, and more widely representative of the surrounding residential areas. The Back of the Hill is well represented, but Hyde Square and Bromley-Heath are not.

As I have mentioned, redesigning the rotary has been discussed with representatives from the Boston Transportation Department, the Department of Public Works and with Bromley-Heath Tenant Management Corporation . Meetings are planned to discuss this issue on its own - one meeting with members of our group, to ensure that we all understand and can articulate the various issues raised by members of the community, and one which Ed Coburn from the Mayor's Office of Neighborhood Services plans to convene, with all affected parties in attendance: Heath St. Neighbors, individual business and property owners who are affected by the rotary traffic, Bromley-Heath Tenant Management Corporation, Bromley-Heath residents, Hennigan Community Center directors, the Boston Housing Authority, the Boston Transportation Department, the Department of Public Works, and Lenox-Martel. We hope to invite a cycling organization, such as the Boston Bicycle Coalition, as well.

Ricardo Sanchez from Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Development Corporation is researching the ownership of the various empty lots, to be able to consider development options with a clear understanding of what land is available and from whom it must be acquired. He has met with the Back of the Hill Community Development Corporation to involve them in the development process. Heath Street Neighbors will be meeting with David Murphy from Ruggles Baptist Church in January to discuss the disposition of the church-owned lots, which include five connected parcels abutting the Hayden Steps (see below), an old trucking transfer station, and several isolated lots which by today's zoning regulations are by themselves too small to be buildable.

The Director of the Hennigan Community Center and I have discussed the idea of holding a joint holiday party for residents of the area - from Hyde Square, Bromley-Heath, and the Back of the Hill. He wants to attract more Back of the Hill people to the

Community Center, and Heath Street Neighbors would like to reach out to residents on the Hyde Square side of Heath Street and in Bromley-Heath.

Opening the Hayden Steps has been mentioned by several residents - myself among them - as a desirable objective. The steps climb from Heath Street, across from the Hennigan School, up to Lawn Street, a residential street on the Back of the Hill. They were closed over ten years ago, and are overgrown and deteriorating. If open, they would provide easy access to the Community Center to residents of the Back of the Hill. Closed, we are forced to make a large pedestrian loop, circling a block-long area to reach the school. We have begun to look into what must be done to re-open the steps, and to investigate whether or not this action would be warmly welcomed by the majority of Back of the Hill residents, who are concerned about the possibility of the steps attracting crime.

### **No Tasks Initiated**

The work of identifying funding sources and developers, and planning development projects is still down the road. The underlying work of building an effective neighborhood coalition and creating an open participatory process is a work in progress, and is essential for development to happen in a way that will preserve control by the community.

### **Conclusions, Insights, and Recommendations**

The goal of the Project has remained constant, but the immediate objectives, and the attendant timeline, have changed. It is not that they are different from those envisioned at the outset of my Project; rather, I have inserted the steps which must occur to create a strong community organization, and the steps that take place between the formation of a community group and the development stage. Objectives which I expected to accomplish in the early stages of the Project are only now beginning to be achieved. Attaining the ultimate goal of the Project, I now understand, is a year or two down the

road - if all goes well. The “revitalization” of Heath Street will not be concluded for years after that, if at all.

My ability to complete the Project as originally conceived would have been enhanced by the existence of an organization that involved residents of Hyde Square, Bromley-Heath, and the Back of the Hill. In the absence of such an organization, building it had to be the first step. Building this organization is a long and difficult - and essential - process. The course in Community Organizing and CED, offered during my last term in the CED program, will be extremely useful in the ongoing work of involving neighborhood residents. Would that I had had this course earlier on!

Another difficulty I encountered was a degree of isolation. I am working with a group of people (Heath Street Neighbors) but I have had little direct supervision. The staff of Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Development Corporation who worked with us were able to provide some supervision and advice, but we did not have a formalized relationship for this. Had I had the direct supervision of an experienced organizer, and been working as part of a team, my learning would have been more rapid. The support and assistance of my Project group has been invaluable.

I had not anticipated how difficult it would be to engage the participation of Bromley-Heath Tenant Management Corporation. The Bromley-Heath Development is a major abutter of Heath Street, and I expected more residents to be interested and willing to get involved in Heath Street Neighbors.<sup>9</sup> This did, I think, slow the growth and impetus of the organization. The reasons for our/my difficulties in involving Bromley-Heath residents bears investigation, and creative solutions to countering them must be developed. Our method of approach and the culture of our meetings may need to change if more residents, both from Bromley-Heath and from Hyde Square, are to be engaged.

I have gleaned several major lessons from this experience. First, building an organization is a long, slow process. I have learned patience; I have learned not to write people off when they don't attend meetings; I have learned that building relationships, even if they are only over the telephone, is of immeasurable help.

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<sup>9</sup> Their lack of participation was not completely unexpected, as Bromley-Heath has a reputation for being somewhat inwardly-focused.

Second, I have had reinforced the lesson that “the squeaky wheel gets the grease”. Make enough phone calls to city officials, and they will meet with you if only to shut you up. Then, of course, you have to keep the pressure on if you actually want any results - and for this, a strong and organized community is critical.

Third, coalition-building must be an ongoing process. It has taken a long time to sit down at the table with the Tenant Management Corporation, but we are, I believe, on the way to a strong working relationship. We have related, if different, goals, and we realize that we must work together to accomplish either.

In sum, I would recommend that someone undertaking a similar project do it under the guidance of an organization and as part of an ongoing plan of that organization. I have had access to the resources of Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Development Corporation, but that has not really been sufficient. As I learned from the discussions in my Project group, talking problems through with a group of people who share your perspective and have different experiences on which to draw can help move things along when on one's own, one feels quite stuck.

Community Economic Development is not a quick fix. It requires an extended period of effort, and a commitment to the community as well as to the development project.

### **Next Steps**

Ed Coburn has arranged for the Boston Housing Authority and the Department of Public Works to schedule a private meeting at which they will compare plans and concepts for the General Heath rotary. Sometime in February or March, both agencies will be prepared to make a joint presentation to the community. We have asked that they present us with a minimum of three concepts, and get community input prior to developing a firm plan for the rotary. If this proceeds on schedule, the plan will make in into the capital budget for 1999; then Requests For Proposals will be issued, contractors hired, and the work begun.

Heath Street Neighbors will continue to build and maintain a good working relationship with Bromley-Heath Tenant Management Corporation and will work to

involve Bromley-Heath residents in the development process. Participation by Bromley-Heath in designing plans for Heath St., especially at the rotary, is crucial to our success; participation by Bromley-Heath is also crucial in building a sense of a community that spans Heath Street.

Meetings will be held with representatives from Ruggles Baptist Church, to begin to discuss the disposition of their vacant lots. Heath Street Neighbors will follow up on the interest expressed by the Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Development Corporation in pursuing the development of housing on some combination of city- and church-owned lots. If we agree, they will initiate a community process to first determine what kind of development would be acceptable to the neighborhood. If the answer is “housing”, they will continue the process to identify what are the housing needs of the neighborhood and what housing would be acceptable to the community. Small, unbuildable, church-owned lots will be combined with small, city-owned lots wherever possible, and perhaps by next summer we will be engaged in a development process.

With these efforts, we'll continue to develop Heath Street Neighbors into a strong and articulate neighborhood coalition.