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**Acre Plan Outreach and Education Project**

**Lowell, Massachusetts**

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## **Abstract**

Lowell, MA is currently implementing an urban renewal project in the Acre neighborhood of the city. Commonly known as the Acre Plan, this 20-year project was created with input from residents and others in the city, as required by the terms of the Urban Renewal laws that also give the City broad power to implement change, including the power of eminent domain. This residential input will continue.

Due to the transient nature of the Acre community, there is a constant risk of losing continuous representation as well as having representation that is undereducated about the intentions and problems of the Plan. The purpose of this project is to create a structure to continually educate groups of residents, and enable them to meaningfully negotiate with city officials during the full implementation period of the Plan.

Since the beginning of this project, a group of residents has met regularly, familiarized themselves with the Plan, received training in areas they felt were necessary, and engaged in successful negotiation with city officials on issues important to area residents.

## Summary

1. Identify / Define the Target Community that your project will primarily benefit.

This project will primarily benefit people living and working in the Acre neighborhood of Lowell, specifically those in the area targeted by the Acre Urban Revitalization and Development Project (the Acre Plan).

2. Problem Statement

If the current situation is not changed, there will cease to be informed residents sitting on the Community Advisory Committee that reviews projects that are part of the Acre Plan, and monitors what is being accomplished as it relates to the goals of the original Plan. This will essentially give total control of the Plan to the City.

3. Goal Statement

This project's goal is to increase the level of knowledge of the Acre Urban Revitalization and Development Project (or the 'Acre Plan'), among Acre residents and others. This will enable people to monitor and influence the 20-year implementation of the Plan.

4. Describe the current conditions of the Target Community

The Acre Neighborhood in Lowell has historically been home to some of Lowell's poorest people. Every major group of immigrants coming to Lowell has called the Acre home before prospering and moving out. Many of the current neighborhood residents are first-generation immigrants, speak limited English, and are unaware or unsure of their rights. The section of the Acre we are focusing on has a density almost twice the average in Lowell, and Lowell is the 13<sup>th</sup> densest city in the state, having about 110,000 people within 14 square miles. The vast majority of housing is investor-owned, and much is substandard. The Acre has also historically been ignored by the City of Lowell. Many people within the Acre feel they have no influence on City decisions, and that the Acre will always be a poor, underserved community without power.

5. Describe the desired conditions for the Target Community

The written goals of the Acre Plan are to: 1) increase the percent of homeownership; 2) create jobs and stimulate investment in the area; 3) improve the appearance and condition of buildings, and; 4) increase the number of rental units available. The unwritten goal is to create a community that is engaged in decision-making regarding its own future, and active in that process. This is not, however, a primary concern of the department in charge of implementation, so it falls to the community to insist that they have the level of engagement they expect. To do this means having the knowledge to provide meaningful input, as well as grasp the larger picture of obtaining the written goals of the plan through the many changes that will happen over the 20 years of implementation.

## 6. Project Product Statement

This project aims to have a system in place to recruit residents and others into the Community Advisory Committee and train them in the workings of the Acre Plan, its goals, and the role and rights of residents.

## 7. List and Describe the major outputs that would exist if your project were successfully completed

- 1) A permanent makeup to the CAC would be agreed upon.
- 2) A permanent education process would be created to inform residents and others about the intricacies of the plan.
- 3) The residents and the CAC would strengthen their position with regard to influencing the City's implementation strategy.

## 8. Identify those major outputs which have been fully achieved

The residents and the CAC have strengthened their position with the city by engaging in an extensive negotiation process over the creation of a new school on a contaminated site.

## 9. Identify those major outputs that have been partially achieved. Describe the remaining tasks that are required to fully achieve these specific outputs

A permanent education process has begun with a group of residents who have had long-term involvement in discussions of the Plan. The CBA has begun creating a library of documents related to the Plan, and the City has created a repository at the City Library as well. This needs to be completed. An 'FAQ' document should perhaps be created as well, that could be referred to in the future by people with common questions. The City has verbally agreed to a permanent makeup of the CAC. This should be formalized in writing. The subject of creating a permanent 'composition' of the CAC has been discussed within the current CAC membership, but no action was taken. This issue need to be addressed again, and insisted upon.

## 10. Identify those major outputs for which no tasks have been initiated

All major outputs have had some tasks initiated.

## 11. Conclusion/Recommendations

- a. Has your Project Product and/or Goal(s) changed since you began the Project? If so, how and why has the Project product and/or Goal changed?

No, the Project Product and goals have not changed.

- b. Identify two factors or conditions that if they had been different would have increased your ability to complete your project.

The high turnover rate of the population forces groups like the CBA to perform constant outreach to the ever-changing residents of the Acre. Within the four years since the plan was finalized, enough people have changed so that many people we spoke with during recent outreach events did not even know

about the Plan at all, let alone how it might affect them. This in spite of extensive outreach and public meetings that drew dozens of people at a time during the creation of the plan. Another factor is the makeup of the population itself. The dominant ethnic group in the Acre right now is Southeast Asian. Many of those living in Lowell are fleeing years of civil war and militant rule, and are still used to governments that violently suppress all those who speak out.

- c. Identify one unexpected thing that occurred that significantly affected your ability to complete the project and achieve the stated Goal(s).

During the course of this project, the Executive Director of the CBA, who had led the way for community involvement in the Acre Plan, resigned from his position. This eventually led to serious internal turmoil within CBA that made it difficult to focus strictly on the Acre Plan Project.

- d. What two things would you suggest to someone doing a similar project?

1) The committed involvement of a group interested in the details of a plan like this is crucial. Turnover in a long-term training program like this can have serious consequences, and drastically impede progress. 2) It is important for the people involved in this type of project to 'learn by doing' and not simply be 'taught to'. Firsthand experience in something related to the project, and the ability to determine which areas are most important let people take ownership of the future course of an ongoing project.

## Definition of the Problem

### 1. Problem Statement

One of the successful demands from residents was the creation of a permanent Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC) to oversee implementation of the Acre Plan. Over the timeline of implementation (20 years), this committee will need to be able to recruit and train new members, as well as keep a highly transitional community updated as to what is happening and how it will affect them. If this cannot be done, there will cease to be informed residents sitting on the Community Advisory Committee that reviews projects that are part of the Acre Plan, and monitors what is being accomplished as it relates to the goals of the original Plan. This will essentially give total control of the Plan to the City.

### 2. Identify / Define the Target Community that your project will primarily benefit.

The target community are residents of the area described in the Acre Urban Revitalization and Development Plan. Many of the neighborhoods residents are first-generation immigrants, do not speak English, and are unaware or unsure of their rights. During the planning process for the Acre Plan, calculations were based on 1995 data from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). At that time, HUD calculated that the Area Median Income(AMI) for the Lowell area was \$59,200. However, the median income for the City of Lowell itself was only \$29,351, nearly 50% less than the general area as a whole. Even more telling, of the 581 families in the area of the Acre targeted for revitalization, nearly 50% made less than

\$17,000 per year. These figures are to be used to set sales prices for affordable housing units to be built under the Plan, whenever they are built. So this project has the potential to impact some of the poorest people in the local area, if implemented properly.

In the area targeted for renewal, the vast majority of people live in absentee-landlord owned buildings. Of the 581 units of housing in this area, only 83 are in owner-occupied buildings. Many of the residents in this area consider themselves ignored by the City and are convinced the Acre will always be a problem area, with decrepit buildings and problems with drug dealing and prostitution. They do not feel that the City listens to their concerns or cares about trying to make things better.

3. Identify any major assumptions you are making about: the Target Community, the source of the Target Community's problems, etc.

The high turnover rate of the population forces groups like the CBA to perform constant outreach to the ever-changing residents of the Acre. Within the two years since the plan was finalized, enough people have changed so that many people we spoke with during recent outreach events did not even know about the Plan at all, let alone how it might affect them. This in spite of extensive outreach and public meetings that drew dozens of people at a time during the creation of the plan.

Another cause is the makeup of the population itself. The dominant ethnic group in the Acre right now is Southeast Asian. Many of those living in Lowell are fleeing years of civil war and military rule, and are still used to governments that violently suppress all those who speak out.

Of those who have been in Lowell for many years, the Acre has been a substandard community for so long that people long ago gave up on the city making any serious improvements to the area. In fact, Lowell commissioned several studies over the years that identified the Acre as a problem area that needed to be addressed, yet nothing was ever done.

## **Project Goals**

1. Goal Statement

This project aims to do three things:

- a) Increase resident awareness of the Acre Plan, its purpose, and what will be happening over the 20-year implementation period.
- b) Counteract the city's deliberately or accidentally 'flawed' implementation of the Plan, misuse of powers, or reconfiguration of Plan elements that may negatively impact residents and the Acre Neighborhood.

- c) Ensure to the greatest extent possible a consistent resident voice on the CAC, and develop a process for bringing new residents onto the CAC with the knowledge and skills to provide meaningful input and strong leadership.

At the completion of this project I expect to have a working committee of residents and others who are knowledgeable about the Acre Plan, clear about what they expect to happen, and skilled enough to negotiate the politics of Lowell and make it happen.

## 2. Current Conditions

The Acre Plan has been in its implementation phase for three years. During that time the CAC has met regularly to discuss proposed projects, changes that needed to be made to details of the Plan, and has debated how certain projects should be implemented. Some of these changes have been controversial, and there has not been a focus on the creation and rehabilitation of housing that was meant to be a major portion of the Plan. In addition, several people that sat on the CAC in the beginning have left and not been replaced, or have been replaced with people that do not have full knowledge of the Plan and its intentions. I am the only Acre resident who has sat on the CAC, and the last community representative who was involved in the actual creation of the Plan. I will be leaving the CAC, and Lowell, within a year and there is not yet someone to take my place that has my level of knowledge about the Acre Plan.

## 3. Desired Conditions

Ideally, there would be a permanent process in place to recruit new people to the CAC as people leave. The CAC should have a permanent number of assigned 'seats' to ensure representation from different areas and institutions. At least one of these seats should be for an Acre resident. The best entity to take care of training of residents and others would be the Coalition for a Better Acre, which has already been active in this process. A 'library' of documentation and an FAQ list would be established for people to answer questions they may have about the Acre Plan. A continuing series of public meetings would happen to inform and update the community about the progress of the Plan.

## **Project Product-Method**

### 1. Project Product Statement

The project aims to have a system in place to recruit residents and others into the Community Advisory Committee and train them in the workings of the Acre Plan.

### 2. Major Outputs existing if project fully successful

- a. A permanent makeup to the CAC needs to be agreed upon. At present there are no designated seats, just assumptions as to who sits on the committee. A document should be drafted and agreed to by all parties involved that indicates what role each person is filling on the CAC, and what group or organization has the authority to appoint a replacement if that seat becomes vacant.
- b. A permanent education process needs to be created to inform residents and others about the intricacies of the plan, how it may affect them, and why they should be involved in its implementation. This should extend to Board members of the CBA, since they 'hold' a seat on the CAC as well.
- c. The residents and the CAC need to strengthen their position with regard to influencing the City's implementation strategy.

### 3. Background

At the conclusion of the formal planning process for the Acre Plan, a group was chosen to become the permanent Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC), and I represent the only Acre resident on that committee. This committee has struggled to maintain the level of community input and influence that existed during the creation of the Plan. Also, with the daily running of the Plan implementation having reverted to the City's Department of Planning and Development (DPD), we have encountered much more bureaucratic interference than when the Plan was being drafted by hired consultants. The City is required to meet with the CAC to discuss the Plan implementation, but the CAC does not have veto power over the City's plans.

Theoretically, the City of Lowell is bound to create what it proposed in the Acre Plan documents. If the Plan is followed, there would be great improvements to the quality of life for residents of the Acre. However, the city also has the power to make changes to the plan, without necessarily consulting the state agency that initially authorized the plan. Only in the case of a 'major' change, as opposed to a 'minor' change, would the state have to approve the changes. But it is the City of Lowell itself that decides just what constitutes a major vs. minor change, and whether the state needs to be contacted. It is unlikely that state contact would occur without resident oversight of (and possible objection to) the process. It is also very likely that once several of the high-profile projects the city most wants to see happen are finished, the remainder of the Plan (and coincidentally the portions that will most benefit the lowest-income residents) will not be given the urgent attention now being given projects like the creation of a new school. Ultimately, the CAC can always go to the Department of Housing and Community Development, the state agency that approved the Plan, if the plans proposed by the city move too far away from the original vision of the Acre Plan.

The impetus for the Acre Plan Community Education Project was the need to be able to recruit and train new members of the CAC, as well as keep a highly transitional community updated as to what is happening and how it will affect them. Many of those who contributed input to us during the planning process five years ago have now moved on, and newer residents know little of the plan now in action. Two of the

community representatives on the original CAC have left, and I will be leaving within a year. New representatives, especially Acre residents, need to be found and educated in the history, process, and workings of the plan, as well as their rights in influencing its implementation. Ultimately, these new leaders will have to help provide the same training to the residents who will replace them.

## Results

1. Major Outputs existing if project successfully completed
  - a. A permanent makeup to the CAC would be agreed upon. At present there are no designated seats, just assumptions as to who sits on the committee. A document should be drafted and agreed to by all parties involved that indicates what role each person is filling on the CAC, and what group or organization has the authority to appoint a replacement if that seat becomes vacant.
  - b. A permanent education process would be created to inform residents and others about the intricacies of the plan, how it may affect them, and why they should be involved in its implementation. This should extend to Board members of the CBA, since they 'hold' a seat on the CAC as well.
  - c. The residents and the CAC would strengthen their position with regard to influencing the City's implementation strategy.
  
2. Identify those major outputs which have been fully achieved.

The residents and the CAC have strengthened their position with the city by engaging in an extensive negotiation process over the creation of a new school on a contaminated site. The continued involvement of these residents on the implementation of the Acre Plan should make a real difference in how changes are made in the Acre, and to what degree residents have a voice in how those changes are made, when they are made, and who they will most benefit.
  
3. Identify those major outputs that have been partially achieved. Describe the remaining tasks that are required to fully achieve these specific outputs.

A permanent education process has begun with a group of residents who have had long-term involvement in discussions of the Plan. This needs to be completed. The CBA has begun creating a library of documents related to the Plan, and the City has created a repository at the City Library as well. An 'FAQ' document should perhaps be created as well, that could be referred to in the future by people with common questions. If people know the Plan well enough to be able to follow and influence its development over the next 20 years, work effectively with the City administrators responsible for its implementation, and effectively challenge them when improper changes are being made, then the project has been a success. The group currently involved has shown more than some willingness to participate in learning and research processes to learn the details they need to know, which should serve them effectively over the long run of this Plan 's future.

The City has verbally agreed to a permanent makeup of the CAC. This should be formalized in writing. It is imperative that there be a process for replacing those leaving the CAC, and that those replacements continue to identify concerns of the residents and keep implementation of the Plan on track.

4. Identify those major outputs for which no tasks have been initiated

All major outputs have had some tasks initiated.

## Conclusions/Recommendations

1. Has your Project Product and/or Goal(s) changed since you began the Project? If so, how and why has the Project product and/or Goal changed?

No, the Project Product and goals have not changed.

2. Identify two factors or conditions that if they had been different would have increased your ability to complete your project.

The high turnover rate of the population forces groups like the CBA to perform constant outreach to the ever-changing residents of the Acre. Within the four years since the plan was finalized, enough people have changed so that many people we spoke with during recent outreach events did not even know about the Plan at all, let alone how it might affect them. This in spite of extensive outreach and public meetings that drew dozens of people at a time during the creation of the plan. Another factor is the makeup of the population itself. The dominant ethnic group in the Acre right now is Southeast Asian, and are still familiar with governments that violently suppress all those who speak out.

3. Identify one unexpected thing that occurred that significantly affected your ability to complete the project and achieve the stated Goal(s).

During the course of this project, the Executive Director of the Coalition for a Better Acre (CBA), who had led the way for community involvement in the Acre Plan, resigned from his position. This eventually led to serious internal turmoil within CBA that made it difficult to focus strictly on the Acre Plan Project. The E.D. had initially created a Task Force to look at conditions within the Acre and address problems. This group brought together some major players in the City, and essentially forced the City into making a move of it's own to avoid being 'shown up' by the CBA. This led to the creation of the Acre Plan and because of the funding used to implement it, the creation of a Committee of residents to provide input was mandated.

After the CAC became permanent, and this education project began, several of the more involved people learning about the Acre Plan became more active in the CBA and eventually became Board members. The education and spirit of community leadership came with them, and they began to

change the way certain things were done within CBA. The board insisted on having more input into development decisions being made by staff, as well as wanting to know more about the programs being used by CBA to fund projects. Some staff people within CBA did not like having to answer questions by the board and did not want to provide information or training to board members. Unfortunately the E.D. never directly addressed these issues, but delayed the confrontation that was brewing.

This came to a head after the departure of the E.D., and the installation of an interim E.D. to oversee the hiring of a replacement. One of the senior staff that had been the most vocal opponent to changes within CBA decided to leave but wanted the CBA to hire him as a consultant at twice his CBA salary. This staff person had consistently refused to engage in dialogue with Board members, provide training to them, and had often confronted, intimidated, and insulted residents performing volunteer work. The interim E.D. decided that hiring him as a consultant was a good way to 'ease him out' of CBA and prevent a lawsuit he had threatened if he was fired, which was being considered by the board at that time. The interim E.D. also refused to put a Board-ordered reprimand in his file related to an incident involving a teenage volunteer. The board was adamantly opposed to this action, but the interim E.D. refused to consider other options, and eventually the Board felt they had no other choice.

All of this happened during the initial period of this project's implementation, and was a constant distraction from the education process and complicated the progress we could make. Many of the people most interested in the Acre Plan and this project were also the Board members most involved in the internal struggle for control of CBA.

4. What two things would you suggest to someone doing a similar project?
  - a) The committed involvement of a group interested in the details of a plan like this is crucial. Turnover in a long-term training program like this can have serious consequences, and drastically impede progress. The details of the Acre Plan, for instance, are so numerous that it would take several meetings to explain them all to any people entering in the middle of the process and needing to be brought up to speed on the Plan. Nothing moves quickly, and this can be frustrated and create disillusionment among residents.
  - b) It is important for the people involved in this type of project to 'learn by doing' and not simply be 'taught at'. Firsthand experience in an issue connected to the project, and the ability to determine which areas are most important let people take ownership of the future course of an ongoing project. The continued involvement of residents in the implementation of the Acre Plan for instance, will decide to what degree residents have a voice in how changes are made, when they are made, and who they will most benefit. I have found that when presented with all the options before them clearly and equally, as well as the potential consequences of each option, most residents have the ability to decide on a course of action

using reason and strategic thinking. The fact that they have made this decision themselves also seems to carry a greater sense of commitment to seeing it through than when people feel that they have been 'led' to one decision or another.