

## **Growing From the Grassroots:**

### ***What we've learned about developing and supporting sustainable communities***

Making a great plan is one thing. Putting that plan into action takes a whole different commitment.

So in the summer of 2013, Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) Indianapolis asked 30 community leaders involved in their LISC Sustainable Communities effort to share insights on what it takes to shift from an intentionally intensive planning phase to actually taking action on the neighborhood-defined priorities.

Our analysis began with the Great Indy Neighborhoods Initiatives (GINI) that were launched in 2006 across six demonstration neighborhoods around the city. GINI deeply engaged residents, community organizations, civic leaders, businesses, anchor institutions, and others in developing comprehensive plans to improve quality of life in their respective neighborhoods.

In 2009, with the GINI demonstration phase complete, LISC made the commitment to continue to support implementation of five quality-of-life plans through LISC Sustainable Communities. A sixth neighborhood—Mid-North—began a quality-of-life planning effort in 2010.

Last year marked the end of the five-year implementation phase of the initial plans—and now is a key time to stop and reflect on the results. This summer's conversation focused on what drove some of the neighborhoods' major successes to date, including investment of more than \$458 million in the six neighborhoods, revitalization of community organizations, and influencing the spread of neighborhood-led community redevelopment efforts across the city.

We've learned a lot. Here are some of the key findings that will guide our efforts to help revitalize neighborhoods in the future. We believe they're applicable not only to Indianapolis neighborhoods, but to urban neighborhoods across America, and we're happy to share them with you.

## ***Overarching Themes: Six Key Lessons Learned***

During the session, participants explored lessons emerging from their work to transition from planning to action, reflecting on some of the inherent challenges and opportunities in making that shift -- such as the need for more intentional development of neighborhood leaders, additional focus on long-term sustainability, and the impact of the recession on community development efforts overall. They offered the following insights.

### **1. Gathering a large group of community stakeholders for quality-of-life planning builds civic infrastructure and a broad base of support and enthusiasm for neighborhood revitalization.**

The quality-of-life planning phase engaged neighborhood residents, social service organizations, churches, schools, businesses, neighborhood associations and many others in an authentic process to transform their communities. It helped both residents and organizations connect their particular passions and interests to larger efforts.

In the plan implementation phase, most communities were able to use that big tent to lay the foundation for civic infrastructure that allowed people and organizations from within and without the neighborhood to “plug in.” Said one participant: “People are prone to rely on organizations to do things for them. We put the focus on making sure people are engaged ... and now the community is not saying ‘this organization has its name on it so they will do it.’ There is an ability to take ownership now.” Added another: “It is less about someone saying ‘I am going to come in and do this for you’ and more about someone saying ‘I am going to stand by you and do this with you.’ It is a new way of thinking about community.”

**“In our neighborhood, something will come out of nowhere...and having a quality-of-life plan in place helps to plug them in, create an opening.”**

Indeed, when the Marion County Public Library System announced plans to close three branches in the LISC Sustainable Communities neighborhoods, residents mobilized

marches and social media campaigns that succeeded in keeping the branches open. “We were organized and ready to get involved,” said a leader from the Near East community. “In terms of process, having six months for just engagement to build a big tent that lots

could enter before we started implementation... if we had started without that, we would not have had the results we've had." One participant noted that having a plan ratified by the neighborhood also helped keep his community focused on its own agenda and thus less susceptible to outside interests pushing theirs.

The quality-of-life planning and implementation process is not linear, participants said, especially when it comes to engaging residents and other community stakeholders in the work.

This was even more difficult given that implementation took place in the teeth of a national recession, which contributed to what one participant called a "scarcity mentality" across the city when it came to funding community development efforts. Many neighborhoods also faced high rates of resident mobility, leadership turnovers and burn out. Neighborhood leaders said they thus struggled to stay focused on putting plans in place while continuing to engage their communities.

"The biggest piece I grapple with (is that) we are at a place where the quality-of-life plan is influential but we have to still engage residents, to make sure that there is buy in and not just rushing through," said one participant. "How do we balance need for the celebratory moment and still engage community so our efforts are sustainable?"

**"How do you balance expectations for things to be done quickly with needing to involve the necessary people and make sure that there is consensus building and you are not rushing?"**

### **Neighborhood congress: A tool to sustain consensus for community priorities during implementation.**

Southeast Neighborhood instituted a neighborhood congress to monitor quality of life in the neighborhood. The Southeast Congress meets three times a year and is open to all Southeast residents. Congress agendas focus on both celebrating when goals in the quality-of-life plan are achieved and reviewing why other goals and action items failed to get traction. They also develop consensus for forming new action items and task forces.

Jim Mulholland, community building coordinator for Southeast Neighborhood Development, was asked during the session to share how the Congress helped the neighborhood transition to the plan's implementation phase. "The Congress really jump-started it. There was a long history in our neighborhoods of doing strategic planning and lot of time that implementation was given to institutions," Mulholland said. "The quality-of-life plan connected residents to monitoring, updating and implementing a plan, and that was kind of new."

Mulholland said the congress has helped the community put its quality-of-life plan into action. Although he said LISC did a good job supporting the planning phase "... when we got to implementation, no one knew how to do that. Community builders were place-holders, but not sustainable." The Congress has helped assure implementation doesn't lose engagement from residents and other community stakeholders built during the planning phase.

The congress' emphasis on consensus building has helped the neighborhood celebrate what's working and focus critically on what's not without getting stuck. "Sometimes a meeting can get trapped on focusing on dissension ... that is what disengages people. You need to create a place where you celebrate consensus."

In the neighborhood congress model, conflicts are hashed out in task forces, which Mulholland says create the kind of small tables where "you cannot just say your piece and walk out. All those task forces are unique ... there is not just one way to deal with conflict, but there is the will to sit at a table and resolve something."

Several other neighborhoods have followed their example and adopted the congress model in their own communities. "I like the way the congress model incubates small leadership opportunities – if a concern is seen as worthy, a task force forms around an idea that already has energy and it gives people an opportunity," said Joe Bowling, director of the East Washington Street Partnership at the Englewood Community Development Corporation.

## 2. Engaging neighborhood stakeholders in revitalization plans requires intentional and ongoing investment in their skills, talent, and leadership.

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Moving forward to build on these gains, communities must be intentional about capitalizing on opportunities for leadership development, peer learning and addressing issues for racial equity during both the planning and implementation phase, participants said.

Leadership training is crucial not only for residents but for funders, convening organizations, and other partners as well, participants said. Opportunities for training offered by the Indianapolis Neighborhood Resource Center, Ivy Tech Community College, Peace Learning Center, Purdue Extension, and other local organizations must be utilized to help individuals and organizations participate in planning and implementation.

“After the thrill is gone (from the planning phase) you have to find new leaders” to support those who had been involved in the planning process, said one participant. Others mentioned the need to set a baseline for resident engagement and leadership development that can be used to measure performance in support existing and recruiting new leaders.

Knowing resident interests – in “hot topics” and beyond – can help connect them to opportunities for leadership development. “When (residents) were passionate about an issue, they were able to develop leadership skills that went beyond that particular issue,” said one participant.

In addition, this training should include orientations on ways to address issues of race equity. Several participants noted that the planning process alone is not enough. “The process is not conducive to working through those issues,” said one. “It is up to the individuals engaged in process to help facilitate that.”

Learning communities serving the multiple partners, organizations and roles involved in planning and implementation need to be in place, participants said, but must be flexible enough to adapt to the ebbs and flows of the initiative.

LISC was intentional in bringing community builders and convening organizations together on a regular basis to problem solve and share ideas. But demand for learning opportunities will vary according to different stages of the work – such as the planning and implementation phases – and the learning community structure must be able to adapt.

Creating a network for mentors and coaches across the Sustainable Communities and other neighborhoods was also lifted up by some participants as a way to build community capacity for comprehensive community development efforts.

### **3. A focus on sustainability is needed to ensure long-term implementation and community change.**

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Long-term sustainability is a challenge for all place-based community development work, participants said, because of the need for intensive planning, neighborhood engagement and timelines to implement quality-of-life plan recommendations. Although the funding timeline was announced at the beginning of the initiative, and participants used result-focused frameworks that helped them start with the end in mind -- several participants said that, in retrospect, they would have placed more emphasis on sustainability.

We needed to put sustainability up front,” said one neighborhood leader. “If we want to change how each of our neighborhoods work, we need to keep infrastructure in place. And we have not done as good a job as we need to look at long-term success and what it means. If we had thought about that five years ago, we might not struggle as much as we are now.” Added another: “We were encouraged to dream big, which is fine, but then we were told to be practical because we needed to sustain it. I wish we had talked about sustainability earlier in the process.”

#### 4. Time for planning, reflecting, and celebrating each success is critical to sustaining neighborhood quality-of-life plans.

Several participants said periodic celebrations of success have been instrumental in moving to implementation. One leader from the West Indianapolis neighborhood said people engaged in the quality-of-life plan and other stakeholders now gather for an annual retreat “and talk about what we have done as individuals, together as a team, and with partners. It is a great time of camaraderie, and it gives you a feeling you are not alone, and that it takes many at the table to the move the plan. People like to hear about others’ success, how we moved forward from last year.”

**“Intentional periodic celebrations of success directly connected to the quality-of-life plan keeps people thinking, and it works to engage others.”**

And some noted the need for more time and opportunities for planning and reflection to combat burn out and rushing the work. “We went so fast we had no time to breathe and develop,” said one participant, who suggested the use of different time frames for different parts of the work, and to let some efforts go at their own pace.

“It is important we build into the system time for reflection,” said another. “It is part of the process. We get doing so much and we do not step back and reflect where we are, where we have been, where we are going. Reflection, retreat, step back and look in -- that inhale/exhale that is natural to humans, and we do not give it as much due as it needs.”

Time for reflection also allows time for learning from failures and opportunities to re-set priorities. One neighborhood leader said reflecting on missteps during the implementation phase was as valuable as celebrating success, and debates on plan priorities help deepen commitment to the work. “When we began to deal with failures, and we took something out of the plan or tried to, that re-energized people. In wanting to keep something in, people took new ownership.”

**5. Investing in a quality-of-life planning process helps neighborhoods leverage outside financial investment for community priorities.**

LISC Sustainable Communities have leveraged a total of \$425 million in new investment from 2007 through 2012. About \$150 million of that total represents investment in the Near East Side neighborhood that resulted from its

<b>Total LISC Investment:</b>	<b>\$33 million</b>
<b>Total Leverage (non LISC):</b>	<b>\$425 million</b>
<b>Centers for Working Families Clients Served:</b>	<b>8,500</b>
<b>Square Feet Community &amp; Commercial Space Improved:</b>	<b>1.2 million</b>
<b>Total Quality of Life Investment:</b>	<b>\$458 million</b>

designation as an NFL Super Bowl Legacy Project. Still, the remaining five neighborhoods leveraged more than \$275 million during that time, including significant public infrastructure investments through RebuildIndy, programmatic investment through philanthropic dollars, and private investment in real estate.

In the West Indy GINI neighborhood, investment to date totals \$39 million, in Crooked Creek \$64 million, in Southeast \$81 million, in the Near West neighborhood \$60 million, and in Mid-North \$31 million.

When asked what the story is behind those numbers, community leaders cited several factors, including a renewed sense of neighborhood identity that resonated across the city, and the credibility that comes with having a comprehensive improvement plan endorsed by a broad cross section of the neighborhood in place.

“People know where the St. Clair Place Neighborhood is now,” said a leader from that community. “When we started this, that was known. And now we have home sales. So it is the perception (that changed) and the perceptions become reality.”

**The quality-of-life process “gives neighborhoods a narrative as a point of leverage. Prior to GINI, it was organizations giving their own narrative and those are two different ways of talking about this work.”**

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Said another leader: “Having a plan validated our work and funders thus wanted to be engaged. It brought political leaders into the process because it showed the community was invested in what was going on.”

Leverage of additional \$425 million in the LISC Sustainable Communities has resulted from an initial investment of \$33 million by LISC in quality-of-life plans from 2007 through 2012.

That happened in large part because the plans didn’t sit on the shelves after they were drafted. Across all neighborhoods, an average of 80 percent of plan objectives has been completed and are in the process of being implemented.

**6. Investment in neighborhood-led planning and implementation is changing the way city funders, non-profits, and agencies invest in community development.**

The platform of capacity that the LISC Sustainable Communities have built to engage local stakeholders in comprehensive planning and secure additional investment in their communities is causing city agencies and other local funders to re-think the way they do business, participants said.

**“We felt the quality of life plan gave us credibility... And we now have more creative ways for partners to engage.”**

“The city is more likely to ask neighborhood opinions, and citizens have more of a channel to elected officials,” said one leader. “Neighbors have more clout. And more (organizations) are funding partnerships, leveraging interest and investment.”

Local foundations and nonprofit agencies are now asking other communities whether their plans are backed up by strong resident engagement and leadership and mechanisms for tracking progress on plan priorities, said others. Funders increasingly see themselves as stakeholders in a community’s development, and align investment outcomes with neighborhood priorities.

Others noted that their communities are now working more closely with elected officials, as well as serving on committees, evaluating research, and developing recommendations for adoption by city and county agencies. Several participants reported new relationships with

city council members, who are understanding and engaging in the work differently. As a result, communities are increasing their action with governing bodies which opens the door for policy changes that will better support sustainable community development.

**Examples of Success: Neighborhoods in Action**

**Near West: Helping families rise out of poverty**

It's not easy to break the cycle of poverty. Even if you have the desire and the determination, there are lots of complicated factors that have to be overcome.

That's the idea behind the Centers for Working Families (CWF). CWF offers low-income, hard-working individuals and families a full range of services designed to lift them out of poverty and help them achieve long-term financial stability. Begun with a model developed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the LISC-sponsored CWF network has grown from its first location in the Hawthorne Community Center on the city's Near Westside to seven locations across the city. Since 2007, the Centers for Working Families have helped 8,500 people in LISC Sustainable Communities find jobs or get better jobs, improve their credit scores, and develop financial plans designed to help them achieve their financial goals.

The CWF model is based on providing services across three areas: employment and career advancement, financial literacy and coaching, and access to income supports. This model has become accepted as a best practice locally and around the country. The model also built on the early success of the Central Indiana Community Foundation (CICF) Family Success Initiative, and since 2007 CICF has co-invested with LISC in the local network, adopting common benchmarks and reporting protocols. In addition, United Way of Central Indiana recently called out financial stability as a strategic priority for the next five years – and identified CWF as a critical tool in achieving it.

In 2011, LISC was named to the inaugural list of the federal Social Innovation Fund (SIF) grantees for its CWF work. SIF requires a local 2-to-1 match, resulting in a total investment in 2013 of \$1.02 million. LISC uses these dollars to help centers such as Hawthorne fund full-time financial, employment, and education coaches and reach out to the neighborhood's growing Latino population. It's a success story built on the successes we're helping others achieve.

Total Investment	\$983,000
Total Leverage	\$60 million
CWF Clients Served	1,200
Square Feet Improved (with direct LISC support)	122,000

## West Indianapolis: A brighter future together

West Indianapolis works together to tackle neighborhood challenges and to improve its quality of life. They have collaborated on such innovative ideas as the West Indianapolis Community Fund, West Indianapolis Street Teams, and their own Holiday Tree Lighting event.

Because residents in this community consider education attainment a critical issue, West Indianapolis works together to improve education outcomes through a variety of strategies, including working with Head Start at four local public schools and expanding scholarship opportunities available to high school seniors.

One particular out-of-the-box program is the West Indianapolis Goes to College initiative. This ambitious program has one goal: to get every West Indianapolis sixth grader to visit a college campus before he or she enters middle school. The program is designed to teach students about the importance of remaining in and graduating from high school, instill in them the benefits of higher education, and encourage parents, caring adults, and guardians—many of whom don't have a high school diploma or any college credit—to consider and plan early for their children's college education.

Ultimately, the initiative is all about providing hope and motivation to kids and parents who may not think college is an option. Students and parents also connect with sources of support—academic and financial—and tools for successful college preparation.

Started with the help of a small catalyst grant from LISC, this initiative has been wildly successful. In 2011 and 2012, nearly 100 percent of 6th graders from the neighborhood went on college visits. Community stakeholders and schools have adopted this initiative as an annual tradition and have expanded the program to also include ninth grade students. Time will tell if West Indianapolis achieves its education dreams—but the neighborhood is well-positioned to help its kids do great things.

Total LISC Investment	\$1.1 million
Total Leverage	\$39 million
CWF Clients Served	1,200
Square Feet Improved (with direct LISC support)	33,000

## Near East: More homes—and a more connected community

The Near Eastside, home to the 2012 Super Bowl Legacy Project, has experienced quite a transformation since it began quality-of-life planning six years ago. At that time, the 35,000-resident neighborhood was struggling with some of the highest rates of home foreclosure and abandonment in the nation. The number of neighborhood businesses had also declined. As a result, housing was identified as the number one priority in the quality-of-life plan, and economic development was a close second. A spirit of collaboration among local partners – John H. Boner Community Center, Englewood Community Development Corporation, Indy-East Asset Development, East 10<sup>th</sup> Street Civic Association, and the Near Eastside Community Organization (NESCO) – has brought these priorities to life over the past six years.

With LISC’s help, Indy-East Asset Development (I-AD), an all-volunteer community development corporation, hired paid staff in 2008 and developed a master plan for Near East’s St. Clair Place neighborhood the next year. The resulting developments – market-rate, low-income, and senior homes and rentals – welcomed more than 400 neighbors home to the Near Eastside. The average sale price of an existing home in St. Clair Place jumped 215%, from \$22,238 in 2010 to \$70,072 in 2012. New home sale prices averaged \$119,667.

On the business development side, LISC had been investing in revitalization of the East 10<sup>th</sup> Street Business District through the work of East 10<sup>th</sup> Street Civic Association for nearly 10 years. The platform provided by the quality-of-life plan and the civic leadership provided by the Legacy Project sped up the transformational investment. This corridor is now home to new housing and small businesses, including Clifford Corners, a mixed-use housing project providing affordable housing, market-rate housing, and retail; and Pogue’s Run Grocer, the city’s first cooperative grocery. Other significant developments include Payne Connect10n, the west gateway to the neighborhood that connects the Monon Trail and the Cultural Trail; the new headquarters of the John H. Boner Community Center; a new state-of-the-art health center at People’s Health; and neighborhood fitness and youth programming at the new Chase Near Eastside Legacy Center. The Near Eastside today is a better place to live, work, and visit—thanks to a bold vision, a lot of hard work, and some timely support from LISC.

Total LISC Investment	\$16.6 million
Total Leverage	\$150 million
Center for Working Families Clients Served	4,500
Square Feet Improved (with direct LISC support)	571,000

## Southeast: Sustaining neighborhood transformation

Call it civic engagement or community organizing, the squeaky—and organized—neighborhood gets things done. In Indianapolis, one neighborhood—Southeast—created an innovative civic process for not only neighborhood governance and organization, but also for ensuring that their quality-of-life plan is implemented, monitored, and kept alive as a living, breathing document that helps guide neighborhood decisions.

The Southeast Neighborhood Congress convenes residents and stakeholders to regularly monitor the quality of life in Southeast neighborhoods. With the assistance of a LISC-supported community builder, these committed neighbors work together to identify new needs, revisit ongoing issues, and implement action plans to address them. Meetings include time to celebrate accomplishments, acknowledge failures, and discuss potential for improvement.

The group transformed its quality-of-life plan into a website that's continually updated to reflect changes and new initiatives. LISC has also helped by providing catalyst grants for priority projects.

Since 2011, the Southeast Neighborhood Congress has had an average attendance of 72 and a cumulative, unduplicated attendance of 304 participants. In 2012, 59 new people joined the tri-annual meetings. It has proved excellent as a tool for keeping the quality-of-life plan up-to-date and has been effective at identifying and supporting new grassroots leadership.

Even more important, the Congress has helped Southeast Indianapolis accomplish 105 goals out of the 117 original goals in their quality-of-life plan, for an incredible 90 percent success rate. It's proof that when neighbors stay organized and work together, great things happen.

Total LISC Investment	\$2.3 million
Total Leverage	\$81 million
Center for Working Families Clients Served	1,600
Square Feet Improved (with direct LISC support)	278,000

## Crooked Creek: A clear path to the future

For many years, infrastructure deficiencies plagued homeowners and business owners alike in the Crooked Creek neighborhood on Indianapolis's northwest side. The neighborhood along Michigan Road suffered poor pedestrian connectivity due to nonexistent sidewalks, some of the city's most dangerous intersections, and no connection to Indianapolis's sewer system.

Enter the Crooked Creek Community Development Corporation, LISC, and committed community groups, residents, and business owners passionate about their vision to improve their neighborhood. Through the quality-of-life planning process, participants prioritized accessible sidewalks, walking trails and bike paths, as well as major investments in bridge rebuilding and sanitary sewer connections.

Together, LISC and the neighborhood engaged RebuildIndy, the city's infrastructure funding initiative, in discussions regarding investment in the Crooked Creek neighborhood. The result was a successful collaboration between the City of Indianapolis and the neighborhood that made infrastructure improvements a priority for all parties involved.

As a result, not only did Rebuild Indy invest \$51 million in Crooked Creek, but it also invested an additional \$148 million in LISC Sustainable Communities throughout the city's urban core.

These funds, combined with federal dollars, supported roadway and pedestrian safety improvements at 71st & Michigan Road, installation of new sidewalks and trails, parking lots, rain gardens, and area sewer improvements that eliminated nearly 2,000 septic systems. And the results have been impressive. By prioritizing real needs through a well-thought-out, resident-driven planning process, Crooked Creek transformed concern over infrastructure into focused advocacy and action. The result is a safer, more connected neighborhood residents are proud to call home.

Total LISC Investment	\$357,000
Total Leverage	\$64 million
Square Feet Improved (with direct LISC support)	28,000

## Mid-North: An old neighborhood becomes a new destination

Destination Fall Creek (DFC), formed as part of the vision developed in the Mid-North Quality-of-Life plan, exists to transform nearly four miles of Fall Creek into a recreational, residential and commercial destination with access to art, nature, and beauty for every citizen every day. It capitalizes on the neighborhood's unique locale along Fall Creek to weave together diverse neighborhoods and help reestablish the Mid-North area as a unique and progressive place to call home.

Characterized by now-crumbling ornamented bridges, pedestrian promenades in disrepair, and extensive native landscaping that has long since overgrown, the corridor is one of the largest listings on the National Register of Historic Places, with over 3,400 acres. DFC is working to restore the corridor to its original historic beauty and significance, and has become a major rallying point for the neighborhood.

DFC publicly unveiled its implementation plan in July 2013. With the financial support of LISC and the Indianapolis Foundation, an affiliate of the Central Indiana Community Foundation, the plan was developed in cooperation with hundreds of residents and four adjacent community development corporations to recommend strategies, prioritize specific projects, and estimate the costs of making Destination Fall Creek a reality.

DFC has deployed over 2,500 volunteers in collaboration with the City of Indianapolis, Citizens Energy Group, Keep Indianapolis Beautiful, Eli Lilly, Ivy Tech and many other partners. Volunteers have picked up debris, removed invasive species, completed construction of outdoor classrooms, and built public art projects, tables, and seating.

In partnership with the Department of Public Works, the landmark bridges are being restored. The sewer overflow that pollutes the river is being addressed. An expanded bike and walking trail is under construction and the native landscaping is becoming increasingly visible as the neighborhood tackles one project after another along the parkway. With ongoing support from LISC, DFC is literally changing the environment of a neighborhood.

Total LISC Investment	\$11.7 million (since 2010)
Total Leverage	\$31 million (since 2010)
Center for Working Families Clients Served	35 (since 2012)
Square Feet Improved (with direct LISC support)	68,000 (since 2010)

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Most importantly, thank you to the unsung heroes – neighborhood leaders everywhere – who continue to spend countless hours working together to make their block, street, neighborhood, community, and city a better place for all of us to live, work, and play.