COMMUNITY DESIGN CHARRETTE
Youngstown, Ohio
OAK HILL COMMUNITY DESIGN CHARRETTE
Youngstown, Ohio

Prepared for
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SUMMARY

The Shrinking Cities Institute is an on-going initiative of the Cleveland Urban Design Collaborative (CUDC). The Institute consists of programs, events, and research that address issues of large-scale urban vacancy and long-term population decline. The first component of the Institute was the Oak Hill Community Design Charrette held in October of 2005 in the City of Youngstown.

Oak Hill may provide a template for addressing the issues and impacts of urban decline in urban areas where the lack of market demand limits opportunities for new development and private sector-driven infill strategies are often unrealistic. In Oak Hill, 60% of the parcels are vacant and new development for much of this land is unlikely, at least for the foreseeable future.

The primary goal of the charrette was to find ways that vacancy can be transformed into an asset for the neighborhood, rather than a liability. This transformation will occur when vacant land is perceived as an intentional part of the neighborhood, rather than as abandoned and uncared for spaces. To achieve this transformation, the City (or another public or non-profit entity) could begin to acquire vacant land in strategic locations throughout the neighborhood. Over time, this land would coalesce into a neighborhood-defining network of green spaces that would improve the quality of life for existing residents and establish an attractive setting that may be conducive, over the long-term, to new development. All of the vacant property in the neighborhood does not need to be publicly owned—the idea is to carefully choose specific parcels that can be combined to create significant, useful open space. The remaining vacant land in the neighborhood could be acquired by neighborhood residents. The City could facilitate the process of getting vacant land out of tax delinquency and into the hands of individual residents. These residents would be required to maintain the land to established standards. They would also be encouraged to use the land in creative, resourceful, and innovative ways. This process of promoting stewardship of vacant land in the community would convert properties that are currently “no man’s land” to someone’s land, and in the process, return these parcels to the City’s tax rolls.
SHRINKING CITIES

The model for American cities has historically been about continuous growth and development. But the reality is that not all cities are growing. In fact, according to the United Nations, for every two cities in the world that are growing, three are declining in population. More than 59 US cities with populations above 100,000 have lost 10 percent or more of their populations since 1950—so Youngstown is by no means alone in dealing with population decline. Kent State University’s Shrinking Cities Institute seeks to explore alternatives to the prevailing growth agenda and develop land use and design strategies for places where significant new growth is unlikely.

Youngstown is unique because its 2010 plan officially acknowledges that the City is smaller today than it was in the past and unlikely to return to its peak population. In accepting the reality of population decline, the City can begin to move forward with the hopeful and quietly revolutionary idea that smaller can be better if decline is planned for and occurs in ways that makes Youngstown a cleaner, more attractive, and more sustainable place.

The Youngstown 2010 Plan was a partnership between the City and Youngstown State University (YSU) in a ‘town-and-gown’ union, coinciding with YSU’s update of its Campus Master Plan. One of the key precepts of the Youngstown plan is that the City can afford to be “generous with our urban land,” and this became one of the guiding forces of the Oak Hill charrette.

Vacancy in urban areas can have a blighting effect, but the Oak Hill charrette looked at ways that unused land could be converted into a meaningful neighborhood asset. The charrette was an effort to understand the impacts of urban shrinkage and develop strategies for smart decline. Throughout the charrette process, the CUDC explored the following questions:

- What does the opposite of growth look like?
- How will people who live in shrinking places respond to strategies for smart decline if it impacts their neighborhood, their street, or even their house?
- Can redundant or unneeded infrastructure be eliminated?
- Are there ways to put vacant land into productive use?
THE COMMUNITY DESIGN CHARRETTE PROCESS

A charrette is a community-based design workshop, typically held over a two to four day period. Charrettes are intentionally short in duration and this brief, intense design exercise is a way to begin developing consensus around images and design ideas for a neighborhood’s future. The outcome of a charrette is not a plan, but rather a collection of ideas that may inform a future planning process.

The Oak Hill Community Design Charrette was held in Youngstown from October 1-3, 2005. Prior to the charrette, the CUDC worked with city staff to identify the study area, define the desired outcomes, and collect background information and base data for the neighborhood. The event began with a tour of the neighborhood on Saturday morning, followed by a series of community meetings and stakeholder interviews to identify neighborhood strengths, needs, and priorities. The design team then spent time in the neighborhood, documenting existing conditions, analyzing opportunities and constraints, and speaking directly with residents about their hopes and concerns for the neighborhood. Using this information, the CUDC developed a series of preliminary design recommendations and reviewed them with the community at a public forum held on Monday night, October 3, 2005.
EXISTING CONDITIONS

The Oak Hill neighborhood provides an ideal opportunity to begin to understand and address the impacts of long-term population decline in an urban setting. The neighborhood has experienced ongoing out-migration, tax foreclosure, and property abandonment. Approximately 60% of the parcels in the neighborhood are vacant.

Despite the high degree of vacancy and a general lack of market demand for housing in the neighborhood, Oak Hill has a remarkable range of assets. The neighborhood is well situated, overlooking Downtown Youngstown and with convenient access to I-680. Mill Creek Park, a major regional recreation facility and natural amenity, is located at the western edge of the neighborhood. The historic and well-maintained Oak Hill Cemetery is located at the northeastern corner of the neighborhood. Oakhill Renaissance Place, a complex of social service and community-based organizations, anchors the neighborhood’s eastern edge and serves as a link between Oak Hill and Downtown Youngstown.

The area is enhanced by its natural topography, which provides great views of the surrounding city. Dramatic rock outcroppings occur at the northwest corner of the neighborhood. Much of the housing in Oak Hill dates from the 1890s through the early 20th century, providing a distinctive architectural character.

Although demand for housing in the neighborhood is weak, two non-profit organizations, Community Housing Involving Cooperative Efforts (CHOICE) and Jubilee, have constructed 75 new tax credit houses in the area in recent years. These houses are dispersed throughout Oak Hill, although there is a concentration between Ridge and West Woodland Avenues. Another new housing development, Oak Hill Terrace, is planned for a 15-acre site just west of Oak Hill cemetery. The development plan is being prepared by Strollo Architects and will include some market-rate houses. CHOICE has purchased property liens in the area in preparation for the implementation of the plan.
Mill Creek Park

Concentration of new housing between Ridge and West Woodland Avenues

View of Downtown Youngstown from the neighborhood

Historic gas station building

Oak Hill Cemetery
DESIGN METHODOLOGY

Four teams of students worked on design alternatives for the neighborhood, with the guidance of Kent State faculty and CUxDC staff. Although Youngstown State University provided extensive base maps and data on existing conditions in the neighborhood, each team conducted extensive field surveys to verify existing conditions and identify aspects of the area’s landscape structure that could guide the design process. The students documented vacancy and building conditions, the road network, natural features of the area, view sheds, and drainage. The students then prepared a series of analytical maps to better understand these conditions and clarify the central design issues and opportunities for the neighborhood.

Building condition and vacancy The teams went block by block through the neighborhood, identifying the condition and occupancy of each building and parcel. One key finding is that the vacancy rate in neighborhood is actually well in excess of 60%, when vacant and seriously deteriorated buildings are factored into the total. The adjacent map shows viable buildings in shades of green. Vacant lots and deteriorated buildings are shown in shades of orange. Throughout the charrette process, the teams made every effort to avoid disturbing the viable buildings and the people who live in them. Vacant and deteriorated properties were identified as opportunities for intervention in the neighborhood. Blue properties indicate institutional uses and other neighborhood anchors.
Open Land Vacant land and deteriorated buildings create opportunities for new development as well as “un-development” alternatives, such as returning excess land to a natural state or promoting agricultural uses. The adjacent map identifies all of the land within the neighborhood that is vacant, or land that could be cleared through the demolition of abandoned and deteriorated buildings.
Circulation and connections Population decline could provide opportunities to reduce existing infrastructure, such as roads and sewer lines that no longer serve a concentrated residential population. Eliminating infrastructure in Oak Hill is a possibility, as long as a logical network of streets would remain so that residents are connected to the surrounding city and access within and through the neighborhood is maintained.

Oak Hill has a number of brick streets which contribute to neighborhood character and identity. The design teams documented the location of these existing streets with the hope that they will be preserved.
Landform and Viewsheds The neighborhood’s dramatic topography provides views of downtown Youngstown, Mill Creek Park, and the Mahoning River Valley. In the adjacent diagram, parks and green spaces are indicated in green, including Mill Creek Park at the western edge and Oak Hill Cemetery at the northeastern corner of the neighborhood. Vista points are shown in blue and slopes are defined in brown.
Drainage and Existing Vegetation The tops of the ridges shown in the previous diagram define the natural drainage areas within the neighborhood. A major ridge divides the area from the east to the west, establishing two separate drainage patterns. The trees and vegetation in residents' backyards align, for the most part, in an east/west direction, until these vegetation areas meet the slopes of ridges that run through the neighborhood. These vegetation corridors have become functional natural areas that assist in collecting stormwater runoff within the area.
KEY CONCEPTS AND POLICY FRAMEWORK

In meetings with residents, several neighborhood priorities emerged:

**Code enforcement** Many Oak Hill residents maintain their properties and take great pride in their homes. But their efforts and investments in the neighborhood are undermined by nearby properties that have been allowed to decline. Residents would like to see more rigorous and uniform code enforcement in the neighborhood so that problem properties are not allowed to contribute to a sense of abandonment and deterioration in the neighborhood.

**Convenience retail** Residents would like some convenient shopping within the neighborhood. Large-scale retail development would be unrealistic given the size of the existing population and the growing regional retail concentration along the I-224 corridor. But residents would like some convenient local shopping and this retail could also serve those who are in the neighborhood to use the Mill Creek recreational facility.

**Parks.** There are more than 800 residents under the age of 18 in the neighborhood. Parks, playgrounds, and other recreational facilities in the neighborhood are needed to provide these children with something to do, as well as to enhance the quality of life for residents of all ages.
Ownership of adjacent vacant lots This was a powerful, recurring theme. Numerous residents made the same direct request: they would like to take title to the vacant property (or properties) adjacent to their homes. Many expressed an appreciation of the sense of open space in Oak Hill and the current residential densities that allow for some distance between houses.

Vacant lot inventory As a first step in addressing vacancy issues in Oak Hill and elsewhere in the City, a detailed inventory of vacant lots should be developed. The US Census collects data on unused residential buildings, but not on vacant land. The Census also does not measure abandonment. However, much information on vacancy in Youngstown exists in City records and data prepared by YSU. Compiling all of the relevant information about vacant lots (including acreage, ownership, condition, environmental issues, tax liens, bank liens, etc.) in a central, easily accessible database would allow residents, government officials, local non-profit organizations, and private sector developers to make more informed decisions about the disposition of vacant land. Standardized designations for vacant properties could be used to distinguish derelict, blighted properties from those which are being maintained and contribute to the green, open character of the neighborhood. Definitions could be established for usable, unused, and under-used land, as well as for preserved green space.

Landbanking property for green space network Through the use of landbanking and conservation easements, the City can identify opportunities to create an integrated green space network for Oak Hill that serves as a neighborhood amenity and links the neighborhood with other green spaces in Youngstown and elsewhere in the region. The first step is to identify the key parcels in the neighborhood that can collectively provide a unifying green space for the neighborhood, one that gives definition to the neighborhood’s physical form, preserves ecologically significant land, and makes key connections to green spaces such as Mill Creek Park, Oak Hill cemetery, and other open spaces and recreation opportunities in the city and the region.

Existing vacant lots form a link between Oak Hill cemetery and Mill Creek Park. A green linkage could be created in this area without removing any viable, existing houses.
Urban Homesteading  The City of Youngstown and Mahoning County are collaborating on a program to return vacant, tax delinquent properties to productive use. The program, entitled Lien Forward Ohio, is a regional council of governments that will allow the sale or transfer of tax delinquent properties to the City or to local groups that are working to reclaim neighborhoods, such as CHOICE and Jubilee in Oak Hill, who can help individual residents take title to these properties. Getting vacant land into the hands of responsible caretakers is key to transforming the image of Oak Hill. The vacant property inventory discussed on the previous page would be a valuable tool in determining which properties should remain in the City’s landbank for future development or public green space, and which could be transferred to individual owners.

The charrette team suggests an urban homesteading program to complement Lien Forward Ohio. Program options might include, in exchange for getting vacant properties at little or no cost, residents be required to maintain these properties to standards established by the City. Standards could encourage attractive landscaping, the reintroduction of native trees and other plant materials, and/or the creation of habitat for birds and wildlife. If a resident failed to maintain a property to the established standards, ownership could revert to the municipal land bank. Beyond basic maintenance standards, residents could be allowed, or even encouraged, to make productive use of the land they acquire. For example, a resident could acquire several contiguous vacant parcels and use the land for some type of urban agricultural use, or to run a home-based business. Residents would have considerable freedom in how they could assemble a larger property and use their land, provided that their choices did not create a nuisance for the surrounding community. While the City would relax its land use controls, it would not cede control entirely. A city-run land use review board could consider residents’ ideas for their properties and determine whether a given proposal could be implemented without creating problems for neighbors. Beyond meeting the needs of existing residents, an urban homesteading program could stimulate new market demand for the neighborhood among people who may be attracted to the idea of a low density, flexibly zoned neighborhood in the heart of a major metropolitan area.

This urban homesteading model could lead to a purposeful, lively, and sometimes chaotic mix of property types and land uses, united by a defining green space element created through the strategic acquisition of key vacant properties as described on the previous page.
Diagram of varying, flexible densities within the neighborhood, where vacant land provides larger lots for some houses, helps to establish a network of connections within the neighborhood via bicycle and pedestrian paths, or is converted to small parks or other recreational uses.

General approach Census projections anticipate a population loss of 54,000 people in Mahoning and Trumbull Counties by 2030. Since much of this loss is expected to occur in the City of Youngstown, one main objective for Oak Hill is to stabilize the current population and avoid further decline.

The overarching question addressed through the charrette is how can Youngstown—and Oak Hill in particular—begin to function as a smaller, better place. Each of the following design alternatives, therefore, look at:

- building an appealing, viable neighborhood around newly constructed housing units, as well as older, existing housing;
- identifying possibilities for restoring natural systems that take maximum advantage of the high percentage of vacant land in the neighborhood;
- envisioning other uses for vacant parcels, beyond infill residential and commercial uses for which there is little market demand; and
- reducing and removing existing infrastructure, where appropriate.
One underlying assumption that the charrette team brought to the design process was that population decline could lead to urban shrinkage in a very literal sense, meaning that residents could somehow be clustered into dense and vibrant urban nodes, surrounded by a vast, interlinked network of parks and green spaces. This, however, was not the vision of many neighborhood residents. The residents who participated in the charrette said that they value the low density of the neighborhood. Rather than feeling isolated, they like having space between their homes and neighboring properties. So instead of trying to force urban densities on a neighborhood that has evolved away from this kind of configuration, the CUDC team began to think about how a neighborhood could function in the heart of the city with suburban, or even semi-rural densities. Although this is clearly not the only development alternative for Oak Hill, a low density neighborhood with proximity to natural areas and cultural amenities could stimulate new market demand by offering housing types and lifestyle choices not typically found in urban settings.

The Youngstown 2010 plan states that the City should be “generous with our urban land” and the Oak Hill neighborhood could be the test case for implementing this idea. Each of the four design alternatives on the following pages follows the same framework—that a central public space or natural area provides structure to the neighborhood, while allowing individual residents to have great flexibility in determining the configuration and use of the property they own. None of the design alternatives preclude the possibility of future growth in Oak Hill, but they also do not rely on growth for successful implementation.
CONCEPT A: CENTRAL PARK

The Central Park plan establishes a large green space along what is now West Woodland Avenue. There are numerous vacant properties in this part of the neighborhood that could be consolidated to create this green space. Central Park would connect Oak Hill Cemetery with Mill Creek Park through a pedestrian boulevard and a network of meandering paths. The new green space would include a skate park to provide recreational opportunities for young people in the neighborhood. A new senior center is proposed for the western end of the park.

Existing retail uses within the neighborhood would be relocated in a concentrated area along Market Street. All four of the design concepts recognize Market Street as the “front door” of the neighborhood, since this street is the main non-freeway connection between Downtown Youngstown and suburban Boardman. The former GE building on Market Street could become a mixed use complex with ground floor retail and loft housing above. The building, dubbed “Electric Square,” could be rehabilitated using green building techniques and would serve as the anchor for a small neighborhood retail district.
Detailed view of proposed Central Park

Possible skate park configuration

Proposed landscape for Central Park

Meandering pathways would have canopies of foliage

Seating areas along the main pedestrian boulevard within the park
Links between the neighborhood and Mill Creek Park already exist, but could be improved by rebuilding deteriorated stairs and adding lighting, landscaping, and signage.

The rehabilitated GE building on Market Street becomes "Electric Square"
CONCEPT B: SEEDS OF CHANGE

This alternative aims to use the resources and energy of the neighborhood to return vacant land to productive use. The plan was begun by taking a look at where vacant land currently exists, and how this land can be re-worked for the benefit of the neighborhood.

One of the bolder ideas of this plan is to remove the I-680 interchange at the northern edge of the neighborhood. A new green space proposed for the site of the current overpass.

The Oak Hill neighborhood, as part of the larger city and region.
The plan stems from the documentation and assessment of vacant land in the neighborhood, represented in green on this drawing. The natural topography and ridge lines of the area are used to establish a series of paths and pocket parks on vacant land.

Market Street, Falls Avenue, and Hillman Street are the primary linkages within and through the neighborhood. The intersection of Falls and Hillman is a potential development site that would create a focal point within the neighborhood.

Existing and potential green spaces are identified on the diagram above, linked by a network of bicycle and pedestrian paths, indicated by the dashed green lines.
Hillman Park The intersection of Hillman Street and Falls Avenue, site of the existing Hillman Park, could be enhanced as the gateway to the neighborhood and as a setting for some small-scale new development. This is consistent with the City’s 2010 Plan, which designates Hillman as a future green boulevard. The drawings indicate the locations of existing brick streets which could be retained and repaired, adding to the character of the area.
Market District Existing Conditions
The Mill Creek Children's Center and Youngstown Community School complex is a significant asset that could serve as the centerpiece of a new market district, in which vacant land is converted to neighborhood-based agricultural uses.

Market District Phase 1
As a first step, land could be acquired, consolidated, and tested for its suitability for urban agriculture.

Market District Long Term Plan
An existing brick building could be converted for a farmer's market. Breaden and Garfield Streets could be removed to create a larger agricultural parcel. The historic gas station building could be converted to a coffee shop, or other use, if the market begins to draw more residents to the area.

Vacant land would be returned to productive use, producing food and providing jobs for residents. Wind turbines are another way to put vacant land to productive use, generating electricity to reduce residents' energy costs.

Existing buildings could be rehabilitated as part of the market district.
Orchard Hill There is a site on High Street, currently occupied by the deteriorated building shown above, that has wonderful views of downtown. The site could be acquired, the deteriorated building demolished, and overgrown vegetation removed. This would provide an ideal setting for a community center that would also be a link along the park trail that connects Oak Hill to the surrounding city.

Example of a pocket park that could be part of the trail system. Surrounding homeowners could become the stewards of small parks like these, which are intentionally left in a natural state to reduce maintenance needs.
CONCEPT C: LINKING GREENS The Linking Greens plan recognizes the inherent appeal of vacant land in the neighborhood and the sense of openness it provides for residents. In the plan, vacant land is used to provide a natural link between the cemetery and Mill Creek Park by consolidating parcels between these two features and creating a pedestrian trail through this new linear green space. The main features of the plan are:

- Vacant lots are combined to create links within the neighborhood and to the surrounding city with bike and pedestrian paths.
- Vacant corners are activated through community activities. The intersection of Falls and Hillman provides a key opportunity to create this type of community space.
- Falls Avenue received greater emphasis as a major corridor through the neighborhood.
- The plan allows for the expansion of the cemetery to the west.
- Oakhill Renaissance Place becomes the trailhead for the pedestrian and bike path and green corridor.
Vacant lots frequently occur at all four corners of an intersection, creating an opportunity for landscaping and programmed activities to serve neighborhood residents. These interventions can be relatively simple and inexpensive, while still adding value to their surroundings.
CONCEPT D: FINDING GROUND  The population in Oak Hill has been steadily falling for the last 40 years, and a question remains as to where the population will stabilize. Without knowing, specifically, what a sustainable population is for this neighborhood, it is difficult to create a plan for the future. In response to this challenge, the plan proposes two distinct approaches so that it does not preclude future growth, but also does not depend on growth for successful implementation.

As a first step, abandoned land must be cleaned up and blighted properties torn down. Improving its visual appearance will change perceptions of the area. The plan proposes an expansion of the Youngstown Community School property to create an identifiable front door for the school on Oak Hill Avenue. Falls Avenue is emphasized as a link between Mill Creek Park and Market Street.

The plan also addresses the northern part of the neighborhood, which has significant tree coverage and forested areas, as well as extraordinary views. In this area, the plan looks at the interaction of forest, infrastructure, and the street grid, and proposes letting the natural landscape dictate the structure of the neighborhood by adapting the street grid to natural configurations. Hillman Street is extended and curved to link with Plum Street, creating a new intersection that will serve a clearing at the center of the neighborhood.
If Oak Hill’s population continues to decline, the neighborhood will eventually have a village-like character with nearly rural densities, despite being only about twelve blocks from Downtown Youngstown. In this scenario, one approach might be to clean up the land and let nature take over in parts of the neighborhood. The resulting physical character of the area could be very appealing; as a low density, green, and peaceful place in the heart of an urban area.
If instead, population in Oak Hill increases, other configurations become possible. If the population were to grow by a third, the neighborhood would begin to experience re-investment. In this scenario, the intersection of Falls and Market Street would provide an ideal opportunity for development at the front door to the neighborhood.

A roundabout at the intersection of Falls and Market would help to structure proposed development and create a signature entry element for the neighborhood in a highly visible location.
A natural plateau occurs where an extended Hillman Street would intersect with Hawthorne Street. This plateau could be preserved as a pristine natural area, a wild space defined by a formal intersection.
NEXT STEPS

The outcome of a charrette is not a plan—instead, a charrette is intended to generate ideas and provoke discussion. One possible next step would be to create a more specific and detailed plan for Oak Hill on that might combine some of the ideas from the four alternatives discussed on the previous pages.

Understanding the availability and condition of existing vacant land is especially critical in Oak Hill, where vacancy rates are so high. Once the full extent of vacancy is understood, the opportunities for retaining some of this land in public ownership, and transferring the rest to individual owners might be more clear. In order to proceed in this direction, it would be useful to survey community residents and local real estate professionals to gauge potential demand for larger residential lots in this area. It would also be interesting to explore the political and administrative aspects of land use controls in Youngstown to determine whether a more flexible approach to zoning could produce positive impacts in Oak Hill.
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