



# Beyond Neighborhood Revitalization

## In the mid-1970s,

Boston's Jamaica Plain neighborhood embodied many of the characteristics of declining urban areas across the United States. Years of disinvestment had left a blighted and vulnerable community. Nevertheless, many residents refused to give up hope. People of varied backgrounds and incomes joined forces in an effort to revitalize their neighborhood.

Today, Jamaica Plain is one of the most sought-after places to live in Boston. With the mission apparently accomplished, a new mission arises. Many of the neighborhood's rescuers, who banded together to form community groups such as the Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Development Corporation (JPNDC) may not be able to enjoy the fruits of their labors if the area becomes too pricey.

Photographs in this article are courtesy of JPNDC.

## Stability, Sustainability, and Equal Opportunity

This is a common post-revitalization concern for all nonprofit community development corporations (CDCs), not just JPNDC. Young college graduates, teachers, accountants, firefighters, and nurses are among the workers who are excluded from settling in many revitalized communities. In New England, the overheated housing market is one of the greatest threats to economic sustainability of communities.<sup>1</sup>

That's why, in collaboration with other groups, the 28-year-old Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Development Corporation is adapting itself to new challenges. Its approach may serve as a model for other communities that have experienced successful turnarounds. Today's mission is to shape the *kind* of revitalized neighborhood that people want their community to be and to ensure that development is equitable, sustainable, and resident-driven.

### One Neighborhood's Decline

Jamaica Plain was long known for its graceful parks, designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, and its elegant Victorian

homes. It was also known as a place where working-class and immigrant families found jobs and put down roots. For generations, businesses flourished in JP and provided jobs. For example, at the turn of the 20th Century, Jamaica Plain and adjacent communities were home to 25 breweries—the highest concentration in New England. And the massive TG Plant Shoe Factory used to be the largest industrial site in Boston, employing 4,000 people in its heyday.

But by the 1960s, factory jobs were leaving, and many Bostonians were moving to the suburbs. Abandoned breweries attracted vandals, and banks refused to approve mortgages. In 1976, arson destroyed the shoe factory. For nearly two decades the abandoned property attracted drug dealers and illegal dumping.

The defining moment in JP's downward spiral was the proposal to raze large sections to build an eight-lane highway. More than 400 homes were destroyed before a broad alliance of residents stopped the project. Their success inspired them to create organiza-

tions that could direct future development.

### Community-Based Reinvestment Strategies

From 1977 to 1997 JPNDC and others undertook numerous initiatives to reverse blight, create jobs, and promote community ownership. The Brewery Small Business Complex, a formerly abandoned five-acre brewery, became home to 40 small businesses employing 200 people. Distressed buildings were either renovated as resident-owned cooperatives or sold at affordable prices to first-time homebuyers. Community organizers brought residents together to plan improvements and to help merchants create one of Boston's strongest neighborhood business associations. Another program provided technical assistance to merchants, who have been able to access nearly \$5 million in financing from banks that had not previously made loans to small, inner-city entrepreneurs.

Occasionally during these 20 years, the real estate cycle turned upward, and investors took an interest in Jamaica

Plain. Community leaders saw the risk for the neighborhood's hallmark diversity. So a local tenants' group, City Life/Vida Urbana, and JPNDC formed an alliance to protect low-income residents from displacement. Together they created an effective mix of public advocacy, direct action, and development expertise that led to acquisition of key neighborhood properties and their redevelopment as permanently affordable housing. The alliance produced a total of nearly 200 rental or cooperative units for families and the elderly.

By 1998, the results of this community activism were visible throughout Jamaica Plain. On Lamartine Street, the new Nate Smith House for low-income seniors replaced an eyesore that a notorious landlord had long refused to repair. The Hyde Square Cooperative brought new life to a troubled area, replacing trash-filled lots with townhouses and a community garden. And 20 years after fire destroyed the Plant shoe factory, a private developer, a public-housing tenant-management corporation, and JPNDC teamed up to build a community health center. They also

brought in a Stop & Shop, which was the first major supermarket to build in Boston's inner city in 15 years.

In 2001, the National Community Development Initiative cited JPNDC in a study on the catalytic role of CDCs in neighborhood revitalization. One of NCDI's main indicators was rising property values.

But rising property values are both good news and bad news.

### Strategies for Stable, Equitable Communities

Housing prices began rising in Jamaica Plain after 1995 and have continued to increase ever since. In ten years, the median price for a single-family house went from \$165,000 to \$500,000. Jamaica Plain is now the third most expensive of the 16 neighborhoods in Boston, which is one of the most expensive metropolitan areas in the United States.

If property values are the only measure, then revitalization has occurred. The decline has been reversed. But what is the proper role for a community development corporation after that?

Neighborhood turnaround raises a new set of concerns. Sociologists and other researchers who have studied gentrification generally agree that once real estate agents "discover" an up-and-coming neighborhood, a new wave of residents arrive who are attracted to its cafes and investment potential but are relatively unlikely to put down roots. In his classic book *Common Ground: A Turbulent Decade in the Lives of Three American Families*, J. Anthony Lukas termed such gentrifiers "the most mobile members of a mobile society." Census and real estate data confirm increasing transience in JP, lending credence to the worries of long-term residents about social stability.

New situations call for new strategies to ensure that revitalization is sustainable and benefits low- and moderate-income residents. The following approaches being tested in Jamaica Plain may have application elsewhere in New England

### Leadership in the Affordable-Housing Debate

When gentrification creates sophisticated opposition to additional affordable housing, community development corporations need to be prepared. A campaign to increase understanding about exactly who needs affordable housing (a wide range of people, including teachers and firefighters) and to promote values of inclusiveness and compassion is important. Experienced nonprofit groups need to have answers for opponents who argue that affordable housing translates into crime and trash. Such views represent a lack of understanding.

### Sophisticated Real Estate Capacity

Fifteen years ago, organizations like JPNDC could buy properties from foreclosing banks at rock-bottom prices. Today it is necessary to compete with savvy private developers in a world where deals are made overnight. Although the financial resources of community development corporations



The Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Development Corporation purchased the Blessed Sacrament Church from the Archdiocese of Boston in September 2005. The renovation will provide for affordable housing, commercial space, and other community uses.



The key to success in the post-revitalization stage of community development is constant renewal of trust and the strengthening of grassroots leadership through participatory decision making.

can never equal those of for-profit developers, CDCs need to keep improving their real estate sophistication. That means having staff with expertise, a wide range of expert consultants available, and multiple levels of short- and long-term financing. Then the CDC can move quickly and take risks, putting cash up front so that it doesn't lose opportunities.

### Jobs for Self-Sufficiency

It is important to bring jobs back to the neighborhood, but not just temporary, low-paying jobs. Revitalization groups must help residents obtain work that can support a family. The Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Development Corporation is doing that through its leadership of the Boston Health Care and Research Training Institute, a collaboration of nonprofit organizations and 11 employers in Boston's largest employment sector. Because of the Training Institute, some of the nation's most prestigious teaching hospitals are now investing in previously ignored segments of the workforce to meet their own urgent needs for nurses and other skilled professionals.

### Embracing Sustainability

Mixed-use neighborhood planning, sometimes called "smart growth," needs to be applied to all new projects. In Boston, lead developer JPNDC is embarking with Urban Edge and the Hyde Square Task Force on their largest initiative ever: the transformation of long-neglected Jackson Square with 400 new mixed-income homes, a youth and family center, and 130,000 square feet of new retail, office, and recreational space. A new and vital community will be created on now barren land at a major transportation hub. Moreover, the buildings will incorporate environmentally sound design principles to protect the health of residents and to reduce energy use.

### Continued Commitment to Resident Leadership

Accountability to the community will always be the foundation of CDC success. Recently in Jamaica Plain, the community wanted to save a beautiful Catholic church from outside development. Countless calls and letters to the Archdiocese of Boston from church members and 1,400 petition signatures supporting a JPNDC purchase made it

clear what the community wanted. In September 2005 the JPNDC became the first community development corporation in Boston to purchase a shut-down church for use by the neighborhood.

The key to such successes is constant renewal of trust and the strengthening of grassroots leadership through participatory decision making. The work is never done. CDCs that see revitalization efforts bear fruit must be more vigilant than ever to ensure that the low- and moderate-income people they serve have economic security, equal opportunity, and a role in shaping their future.

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*Sally Swenson is resource development director and Chris Ney is resource development associate and of the Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Development Corporation in Boston.*

### Endnote

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.nhc.org/chp/p2p/>. By typing in the name of a city, one can view a table showing annual income needed to afford a median-priced home compared with the income of professions such as teacher and police officer.