

Building with a Purpose

Written by Wesley Cate on Jan 19, 2012

The Avondale Meadows neighborhood was constructed in 1948 as America's soldiers returned from war. The neighborhood featured a summer-stock theater—the Avondale Playhouse—that attracted Hollywood personalities to the playbill. The neighborhood also boasted a premier shopping center. Complete with attractive amenities, the Meadows became home to many young lawyers, doctors, and business executives who would later rise to prominence in the city. By the 1970s, the Meadows had entered into a swift decline after the City of Indianapolis attempted to better manage its poverty by building five housing projects for low-income families. The projects drove out business and forced longtime residents into the suburbs. With 80% of its residents living below the poverty line, the Meadows was mired in poverty. The once-thriving Meadows became an incubator for crime and even earned the title of “the worst part of the city.” Four city administrations have since attempted and failed to revitalize the area.

But over the last few years, the Meadows has been experiencing a renaissance. Outraged that for the last 30 years area schools had graduated only 25% of their African American males, stakeholders from the community stepped forward to address the problem head on. In 2004 and again in 2006, charter schools were established in the neighborhood. The two schools—the Challenge Foundation Academy and the Charles A. Tindley School—have graduated 100% of their students, who all have gone on to college fully funded. Nevertheless, good schools weren't enough to break the cycle of poverty in the neighborhood. “The sad news is that many of our kids don't come to school ready to learn, because of what happens in their neighborhoods and their homes the night before,” says Gene Zink, a local business leader involved in the Meadows revitalization. “So we decided that maybe we should try to do more.” Acknowledging the need for a multifaceted approach to community development, the Meadows turned to a tried-and-tested model of community development.

The East Lake Model

In the early part of the 20th century, the East Lake neighborhood in Atlanta gained notoriety through the East Lake Golf Club where golfing legend Bobby Jones played his first and last games of golf. The area also became a vacation spot for the well-to-do until the East Lake neighborhoods began to deteriorate in the 1960s.

In response, the Atlanta Housing Authority built the East Lake Meadows housing projects. The 1970s were marked by rapidly declining property values and a rise in violent crime, earning East Lake Meadows the nickname Little Vietnam. Not only did East Lake become one of the most dangerous areas of Atlanta, it had become one of the most dangerous places in the country. By 1995, crime was 18 times higher than the national average, *employment* was at 13.5%, and only 4% of residents earned incomes over the poverty line. With a \$35 million drug trade, crime was the primary industry.

Profoundly unsettled by East Lake's condition, Atlanta business mogul Tom Cousins decided to target this epicenter of poverty

through an ambitious community redevelopment effort. Along with a number of partners, Cousins created the East Lake Foundation to oversee a comprehensive redevelopment of the community. Using the community's golfing heritage as a catalyst, Cousins developed a holistic approach that targeted crime and improved education, housing, business, and community life. As part of the effort, the East Lake Golf Club was rehabbed and used as a source of revenue for the Village of East Lake.

The entire project cost \$128 million and funding came from all corners of the city: government agencies, corporations, foundations as well as Cousins himself. As a result of the intervention, the once-troubled neighborhood was transformed. Today East Lake Village features a 542-unit mixed-income housing complex controlled by the East Lake Foundation, a charter school where 94% of students meet or exceed state standards, a grocery store, a junior golf academy, as well as a number of other amenities. The community also saw an impressive 95% reduction in violent crime. In 1998, the East Lake Golf Club hosted the PGA Championship and the U.S. Amateur in 2002—events that would have been unthinkable a decade earlier.

The model established at East Lake is not a one-size-fits-all remedy but it does provide the scaffolding necessary to begin to build. Essentially, the model boils down to selecting a troubled neighborhood, identifying dynamic leadership, defining the scope and scale of the intervention, creating a funding plan, and committing to the long haul. But the hallmarks of a successful model include trust, transparency, communication, and strong relationships.

After seeing the success at East Lake, Cousins sought to export the model to other cities. Together with Warren Buffet and renowned hedge-fund manager Julian Robertson, Cousins established Purpose Built Communities to catalyze the East Lake model in neighborhoods across the nation, including the Meadows in Indianapolis.

Avondale Meadows

“And after visiting East Lake, I guess we ‘drank the Kool-Aid,’” Gene Zink quipped. The East Lake model provided a blueprint for holistic redevelopment that could be customized to Indianapolis's idiosyncrasies. “Each city has its own personality, its own set of circumstances and politics,” says Trevor Bradley, executive director of the Meadows Community Foundation. “So the Purpose Built model is not to change the personality of Indianapolis.” He continues:

Holistic revitalization differs from most community development work in that it strives to address the array of issues and challenges that trap families in intergenerational poverty. Rather than focusing on just a single component of community change, holistic initiatives typically include mixed-income housing, radically improved cradle-to-college educational opportunities, youth and adult development programs, jobs and job training, health and wellness programs, transportation access, recreational opportunities, and commercial investment.

Holistic redevelopment is so crucial because every community exists in a delicate ecosystem that requires a customizable, bottom-up change to improve the whole.

Equipped with a model and a core of good schools, Strategic Capital Partners, Meadows Community Foundation (MCF), Purpose Built Communities, and countless other community partners identified the central needs of the community and a plan of action. Strategic Capital Partners was identified as the master developer and is responsible for casting vision, raising money, design, building, and operations. The MCF, headed by Bradley, is the lead organization and oversees the operations in Avondale Meadows community—MCF brings groups together, builds bridges, and communicates with the community. Purpose Built Communities acts as a consultant and a catalyst. Numerous other partners in the community are providing social services, insight, security, and countless other functions to bring the plan to life.

After listening to the concerns of the neighborhood, four focus areas were identified alongside education as the central components of redevelopment: security, housing, business, and amenities. “With holistic redevelopment, you look at the issues in the community and you say, ‘here are the priorities.’ For us it was #1 education, #2 crime, #3 housing, #4 if you’re going to have good housing, you’ve to have the amenities that go with that—recreation, safety, health care,” says Zink. He also mentioned business as a priority, citing that the nearest grocery store is five miles away.

Following the East Lake model, the group then pieced together the funding. The entire transformation is expected to cost \$150 million and is to be implemented in several phases. The funding comes from a wide variety of sources. In the apartments alone there are eight layers in the capital stack that include federal, state, and local dollars as well as private funds. The community center has six layers in the capital stack. “You can dream all you want to dream, but if you can’t finance it, it won’t happen,” says Zink.

On September 28, 2011, part of the dream was realized when phase one of the project was completed. Billionaires Warren Buffet and Tom Cousins traveled to Avondale Meadows to cut the ribbon initiating the East Village 250-unit apartment complex. While the opening of the \$25 million mixed-income complex gives reason to celebrate, it is only a drop in the bucket. The entire redevelopment will be executed across seven phases with phase two, the development of the Avondale Meadows Health and Wellness Facility, expected to be completed sometime in 2013. Phases three through seven are still in the predevelopment stages. Once the entire redevelopment is complete, Avondale Meadows will have two great charter schools; 550 mixed-income housing units; a health and wellness center, which will house a world-class clinic run by IU-Health; a YMCA with classrooms for three- and four-year-olds; a senior housing project; ball fields; and walking paths.

Vision, funding, and leadership have certainly fueled the redevelopment process, but the intangibles have brought the model to life. Bradley has been particularly valuable to this aspect of the process by building the trust of the community through transparency and relationships.

Every step of the way, my job is to engage the community in what’s going on, what’s going to happen, how’s it going to work

for you: if it is not going to work for you, let’s talk about it. We have lots and lots of community meetings. I go to at least 10 community organization meetings a month. If I didn’t, that would be a problem. I have to listen to what the community is talking about.

Accentuating how important involvement with the community is, Bradley says, “What the Meadows Community Foundation and its partners have reinforced is that community engagement and information sharing are critical to the success of neighborhood efforts such as this.” To ensure that partners are listening and sharing with residents, MCF developed an advisory group comprised of neighborhood leaders, partners, residents, and those concerned with the improvement of the area. The group acts a listening mechanism and meets once a month at the MCF office to advise Bradley and the MCF board on grassroots sentiment, neighborhood concerns, and advice from within.

Even though there is still a lion’s share of work to be done, the community has already started to see improvements. For instance, the two charter schools, the Challenge Foundation Academy and the Charles A. Tindley Accelerated School, have been performing at a high level. They boast a 100% graduation rate and college placement on full rides. The other notable change has come along with the construction of new public housing, which has resulted in a notable decrease of crime.

Even with positive gains, Zink and Bradley certainly don’t view the revitalization of Avondale Meadows through rose-colored glasses. “We’re going to have challenges; we’re going to have to adjust. Change is always a little challenging. If this revitalization stuff was easy, everyone would be doing it,” says Bradley. “And it is not going to be Kumbaya with everyone running and skipping,” Bradley adds. “But I can absolutely assure you that in five years when we look back, this neighborhood is going to be a night-and-day difference, a marked improvement. It will be a much better place to work and live, to send your little ones to school.”

Special thanks to Kelly Givens for her contribution to this article.

