

# The Wilkinsburg Plan

ACTION PLAN: RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT  
STEPS (2015)

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## The Project

The Wilkinsburg Plan is a strategic plan created to guide public policy in the Borough of Wilkinsburg. Comprised of three separate documents, The Wilkinsburg Plan was distinctly different from others previously conducted in the state of Pennsylvania. Representing the combined efforts of many stakeholders, the plan was adopted in 2010 and now is approximately half way (five years) through its intended lifespan (ten years). The three documents of The Wilkinsburg Plan include:

- 1) The Comprehensive Plan: A plan for the entire Borough.
- 2) The Business District Revitalization Plan: A focused strategic plan for the Penn Avenue and Wood Street business district.
- 3) The Five-Year Plan and Financial Management Study: Part of the Borough's Early Intervention Plan, a complete review of the Borough's financial resources and organizational capacity to deliver critical public services for the residents of Wilkinsburg.

The project to update the plan was a partnership between the Borough of Wilkinsburg, the Wilkinsburg Community Development Corporation (WCDC), Hosanna House, Inc. and the Coro Center for Civic Leadership (Coro). Through Coro's Fellowship in Public Affairs a Fellow was assigned to the project, spending eight weeks with each of the three Wilkinsburg partners.

Due to the limited time period, complexity of the plan, and the limitations of a one-person consulting team, the entirety of the plan was not updated. However, all pieces were reviewed. The results have been provided via four documents. For easier understanding, the hundreds of action steps identified in The Wilkinsburg Plan were the key focus of the update. This did result in parts of the plan that were not action-oriented (such as market analysis) to be excluded from the update. The goal is to provide a clear document that identifies what has been accomplished, what remains to be done and what the priorities are moving forward. Hopefully, this aids in continuing the progress established by the creation of The Wilkinsburg Plan and prevents the original extensive input from becoming obsolete. The entirety of the Coro Fellow project has resulted in the following four documents.

- 1) The Comprehensive Plan 2015 Update
- 2) The Business District Revitalization Plan 2015 Update
- 3) The Action Plan: Recommendations and Next Steps 2015
- 4) The Health and Human Services Addendum

While the Five-Year Plan and Financial Management Study was not updated, it was reviewed and discussed with stakeholders to provide context in understanding the operations of the Borough.

## **Introduction**

An action plan was not originally part of Wilkinsburg Plan. Instead all recommendations were identified within the three documents of the Comprehensive Plan, Business District Revitalization Plan and the Five-Year Plan and Financial Management Study. Within the Comprehensive Plan, five priority strategies were identified as the starting process to the hundreds of Borough-wide recommended actions. Those five priority strategies were updated in the Comprehensive Plan Update. This document, The Action Plan is intended to be a simplified view of the top recommendations and next steps identified in this update. It is not based on an update to any existing document although information from The Wilkinsburg Plan was used for determining priority goals. Therefore, recommendations listed here may not have been included in The Wilkinsburg Plan, yet arose from the information and public input gathered during the research for this update.

This document itself evolved from information gathered during the research process. As part of the research process, many stakeholders interviewed mentioned The Wilkinsburg Plan, with its 675+ pages as being extensive and therefore difficult to keep in mind. In response, the 320 pages of the Comprehensive Plan and Business District Revitalization Plan were distilled in the updates and this documented was created for a quick summary of the new findings and most important plan pieces.

## **PROCESS**

Through a process of interviewing various stakeholders, multiple opinions and perspectives were considered in the update to accomplishments and priorities. While a multitude of individuals were contacted for interviews, not every stakeholder was able to be reached. The breakdown of contributors include: business owners, investors, residents, government representatives, council members, board and commission members, non-profit leaders, congregation leaders, and more. In total approximately 100 interviews were conducted as well as the 20+ community meetings attended which contributed to gathering additional resident perspectives. Additionally a recent survey (June 2014) from the WCDC's Keystone Main Street application was used - contributing the opinions of 260 respondents (including 201 written responses which were read and categorized) around the subject of perceptions of Downtown Wilkinsburg.

Lastly, The Wilkinsburg Plan was thoroughly reviewed along with other available studies and resources including university student projects, consultant reports, and community documents.

# Moving Forward

## 1) CREATE A PLAN FOR HOUSING AND NEIGHBORHOODS

### *Problem*

In every interview conducted the same two questions were posed at the end of the interview:

- 1) What is the biggest barrier for Wilkinsburg moving forward?, and
- 2) What would success in this project look like to you?

The answers to these questions included some diversity but were surprisingly consistent. Nearly everyone said success in the project would be intervention in the current system to move Wilkinsburg forward. The list of suggested barriers is longer but by far the biggest barriers identified were the state of the school district, blight, and the tax burden.

With enough buildings to support twice the current population, a largely delinquent tax base, and aging buildings the borough stands in a point of time where many vacant properties will soon need investment to be saved or will soon need demolition to protect the public. However, both investment and demolition cost money. The Borough does not have the budget to demolish every building and the market does not encourage investment in all of Wilkinsburg. Financially, the borough, like many other small communities across Pennsylvania faces challenges in providing all the needed services within a small community. The same funding problem persists for the school district, which is funded from property taxes – taxes that are not being paid and are low due to assessed home values. Additionally, a large portion of the school age children in the community are sent to charter or private schools (especially in the upper grade levels), a factor that redistributes funds from the Wilkinsburg School District to other schools.

### *Solution*

The Comprehensive Plan focuses extensively around a need for a housing redevelopment plan. But no strategy exists and there is no person solely dedicated to housing within the Borough. Different organizations and individuals offer support but often have other tasks to address. **The first and primary recommendation of the action plan is to establish the housing and neighborhood strategy.** The strategy should encourage private investment while being strategic with public investment. Marketing and supporting housing development within Wilkinsburg could easily be a full-time position. It is recommended that a staff member be added to either the Borough or WCDC to support housing needs and begin the process of establishing a housing plan.

If a staff person cannot be added to the budget, a strategy for neighborhood development could start by reviewing the Comprehensive Plan. Action can be started by identifying a list of projects to target in the borough. For equitability, intermix projects from the different wards and different population areas. This list can either be pulled in order directly from the plan or identified in bits and pieces. For effectiveness, intermix costly tasks with tasks that require little to no capital input. Since all the ideal tools for neighborhood revitalization do not exist within the Borough, projects to identify tools can also be added to the list. For example, preferably a neighborhood revitalization plan would include a program and entity to acquire key vacant, deteriorated, and/or tax-delinquent properties to use, redevelop, demolish or bank. However, since that entity does not exist, other solutions should be examined.

Example housing strategy starter list:

- Investigate available land trusts and land banks
- Corridor investment project: Franklin neighborhood (\$)
- Create site inventory of available properties around the transit station and market properties to developers/transit users.
- Streetscape enhancements: Laketon neighborhood (\$)
- Develop and publish a list of available resources for homeowners
- Redesign and construct pedestrian links between the Wilkinsburg Station and neighborhoods to the east. (\$)
- Investigate how authorities can be reengaged to support strategy.
- Apply for TRID study. (\$)
- ETC.

As mentioned in the Comprehensive Plan update, if a strategy were in place and transparent within the community, investment could be shown to be planned, targeted for all three wards, within all levels of income, within all racial populations.

#### ***Additional Solutions***

The following were recommendations from stakeholders to be considered. These suggestions were not checked based on their likelihood for success, legality, or the standard for neighborhood development. They are, however, statements from those familiar with Wilkinsburg neighborhoods.

- 1) Create a Landlord Association

- a. Creating a Landlord Association would allow the good landlords to continue to positively promote and impact the Borough. Additionally it would put pressure on negligent landlords to conform to standards and meet regulations.
  - b. To promote homeownership, the Landlord Association could be used to identify long-term and strong tenants that could/want to own homes.
- 2) Identify Housing Resource Lead
- a. A Housing Resource Lead would work to connect identified long-term tenants to homeownership resources.
  - b. A Housing Resource Lead would work with government and private resources to support affordable infill development.
  - c. A Housing Resource Lead would bring in agencies that support existing homeowners in maintenance so they can stay in their homes.
  - d. A Housing Resource Lead would market existing programs like the Allegheny County Vacant Property Recovery Program.
- 3) Support existing residents with maintenance
- a. When residents struggle financially, housing stabilization decreases. Investing in stabilization efforts for existing residents will both keep the homes on the tax role and also prevent that home from being an unsellable or dangerous property once the existing tenant is gone.
  - b. Use CDBG funds to facilitate stabilization.
- 4) Work with tax collector and strategically send repairable, significant buildings to sheriff sale.
- a. This would require a system to decide what goes to Sherriff's sale.
  - b. The purpose here is to prevent the houses from being un-repairable by the time they reach Sherriff's sale. By sending higher quality homes, the sale prices are likely to be higher and able to pay off more Borough fees.
- 5) As identified properties about go to Sherriff's sale: Market properties to appropriate developers and investors.
- a. This would serve to encourage investment and to limit slum landlords from buying properties.
- 6) Address housing through the 3 parts: infill, stabilize, ownership. All three should be simultaneously pursued.
- 7) Track and address "zombie foreclosures".
- a. Zombie foreclosures were defined as when a mortgage company does not proceed with foreclosure in Wilkesburg because of low values and high taxes. The actual owner then abandons the property out of fear of foreclosure and being homeless. The mortgage company decides not to foreclose. The housing is then left to deteriorate although originally being a livable structure.

Whether or not these stakeholder recommendations are used, something needs to be done around housing and neighborhoods. Viewed as a risk-adverse community, the choice to have not strategy is a choice and a risk of it's own. And with time, the risk associated with doing nothing continues to grow.

## **2) CLEARLY IDENTIFY ROLES AND PROCESSES TO STRENGTHEN COMMUNICATION WITHIN BOROUGH ENTITIES**

### ***Problem***

With an abundance of work outlined for the future, division of work is essential. There is no one group or organization that can address all the tasks in The Wilkesburg Plan by themselves. Luckily Wilkesburg has a variety of boards, commissions, and authorities within the Borough available to assist in implementation. Unfortunately confusion, inactivity, and lack of communication between the boards cause delays in projects and inefficiency. When committees operate with volunteers and only meet once a month, it is essential to ensure time spent is dedicated to needed tasks and required information is shared effectively.

### ***Solution***

In order to efficiently tackle The Wilkesburg Plan it is recommended each board, committee and authority first review their mission, tasks, and expectations. The purpose of reviewing these details is to understand their responsibilities so time can be appropriately dedicated to each task. For example, applications should not be the prime undertaking of a group tasked with planning; although applications would be an appropriate dedication of a permitting group. Once the boards understand the expectations of their governance, conversations should occur on how best to communicate with the other governance groups. Delegation should remain as a tool for operation. A process should be created to address how to discuss delegated projects with the intent being that delegated tasks remain delegated, do not get denied by another group and then creating double work for the original board. Finally once 1) committee purposes are understood, and 2) time appropriately dedicated, and communication processes between boards established, tasks from the plan can then be appropriately divided between the authorities based on mission alignment and available man power.

## **3) CONTINUE AND REPLICATE COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS**

### ***Problem***

There is division throughout the Wilkesburg population. With three wards, wide ranges of diversity in race and income, and a very physical barrier created by the busway, residents struggle to or refuse to identify with Wilkesburg as a whole. Many times, school districts become a social center that provides a common point of interest for all. But with half of Wilkesburg's youth-containing



households opting to send their children to other schools, the Wilkinsburg School District does not provide that social commonality. Churches provide a sense of community but as the “City of Churches” there are many options and congregations do not necessarily represent the diversity of Wilkinsburg.

#### ***Solution***

During the fall of 2014, Councilwoman Marita Garrett hosted a community conversation open to the entirety of Ward 1 and has continued to host community conversations on various issues. Events such as community conversations offer wards the opportunity to come together in one space and build connections in addition to providing information and receiving feedback from residents. Social events play a similar role. It is recommended for community conversations or similar events continue in other wards and for the whole community as well. The Borough should continue to host community events such as picnics and Art in the Park. However, attention should be given to how to appeal, attract, and communicate with the diverse range of Wilkinsburg residents. Although community gatherings do not immediately break down the divisions, overtime they provide opportunities for individuals to feel connected to events and changes occurring within the Borough. Additional attention should be given to communicating the time of these events to all community members and efforts made to communicate with those not reachable by commonly used social media or electronic methods.

The caveat, however, is that informational community meetings must be purposeful and useful in order for people to continue to participate. Therefore, they should not be over scheduled and should be crafted to appeal to residents of all backgrounds and interests. Additional attention should be given to communicating the time of these events to all community members and efforts made to communicate with those not reachable by commonly used social media or electronic methods.

#### **4) CONTINUOUSLY ADDRESS THE SCHOOL DISTRICT AS PART OF THE COMMUNITY**

##### ***Problem***

As mentioned previously, the most commonly identified barrier to Wilkinsburg’s future is the status of the Wilkinsburg School District. Whether a deterrent due to the perceived quality of the schools or a deterrent due to the mileage rate, the School District must be considered when planning for Wilkinsburg’s future. That being said, the current administration within the school system is showing true dedication to improving the quality of education provided to Wilkinsburg’s young people. Occupying the same footprint as the Borough, the Wilkinsburg School District faces the same problems as the Borough in relation to tax delinquency, unidentifiable home owners, and aging infrastructure built for twice the population. Additionally, nearly half the student-aged population of Wilkinsburg attends other

schools, which results in a loss of revenue. Funded by stagnant property tax and facing increasing costs, the school district faces an uphill battle.

#### ***Solution***

Since improvements will not be made overnight, communications will be necessary between the district, residents, and Borough to identify ways of supporting the entire community. The school district cannot be ignored in planning for the future and yet the school district also needs to focus on providing a quality education. With inherent large-scale impact within the community, the Borough, WCDC and school district partners should be communicating. However, the drastically different focused of the three entities makes working together difficult. It is not clear how changes to the district may impact the community, but the door for communications should remain open to find mutually beneficial projects and policies that support the end goal of all organizations.

### **5) BE PROACTIVE: ENSURE OVERSIGHT AND LONG TERM PLANNING**

#### ***Problem***

Stakeholders identified the Borough government as being reactive with it's action and policy. By reactive this is referring to the nature of the Borough to respond to problems that are happening instead of planning ahead with preventative measures. A part of this is identified as a lack of resources; with daily tasks to consider, long-term planning falls by the side and does not occur. A different part of this reactive nature is the failure to assign oversight or for those responsible for oversight to get mired in other tasks.

#### ***Solution***

This step aligns strongly with recommendation #2 "Clearly identify roles and processes to strengthen communication within Borough entities". Although other groups can be involved with guiding long-term, and proactive thinking, the main proponent of strategic planning should be assigned to Borough Council while the Borough Manager handles day-to-day tasks and staff concerns. As stated in recommendation 2, the amount of time dedicated to these activities should be identified along with any other additional responsibilities Council finds in its mission. The recent reestablishment of Council committees could support this recommendation as a tool for guided strategic planning. The caveat however, is that communication must continue within Council to avoid conflicting or overlapping plans.

## **6) BUILD FROM STRONG NEIGHBORHOODS – STOP THE SLIDE**

### ***Problem***

Through the Comprehensive Plan, 19 neighborhoods were identified within the 2.3 square miles of Wilkinsburg. Each neighborhood was qualified as in decline, good, or transitioning. The suggested plan was to invest in nine focus neighborhoods. Each of the nine focus neighborhoods was given a strategy for redevelopment: 1) infill, 2) corridor, or 3) infrastructure. The theory behind the specific neighborhoods was to focus on the transitioning neighborhoods that border “good” neighborhoods. The only exception being the corridors outside of the main business district which were categorized as “in decline” but were chosen due to their importance to the business district.

One potential roadblock for any neighborhood-related investment is the perceived potential for investment in one section of Wilkinsburg to exclude other parts of the Borough. Wilkinsburg is distributed into three wards and three members on Borough Council represent each of these wards. Leadership should certainly equitably serve the needs all residents, however, the diversity within Wilkinsburg - diversity of wards, demographics, income - should not prevent investment in specific neighborhoods.

### ***Solution***

Investments into the community should be strategic so as to get the best return on investment. The Wilkinsburg Plan identified the best locations for strategic investment through the discussion of the nine focus neighborhoods. These neighborhoods should be prioritized not just for financial investments but also investments of resources and time. In order to support the whole community while focusing on these neighborhoods, series of investment should be targeted for all three wards, within all levels of income, within all racial populations.

## **7) ADOPT DIVERSITY AS A VALUE**

### ***Problem***

The diversity of Wilkinsburg is often considered a strength of the community, as it should be. However, when diversity is not visibly embraced by leading organizations, divisions are created which further polarize this community.

### ***Solution***

Although diversity may not be achieved in the personnel makeup of every organization, the value of diversity can be. Some groups struggle to reach groups of different economic status, race, culture, and geographic location. Some identify this as a problem, but do not know how to bridge the gap. Valuing diversity, in practice, means individuals are purposely crossing

social/economic/geographic/racial/age/gender boundaries to build relationships, listen, and understand where the other is coming from. It means going to the café or barber shop and talking to people, hearing where they are coming from and what they are concerned about.

The basis of valuing diversity is to understand that diversity of opinions, interests, and viewpoints is useful for the organization and for understanding the community. Actively seek and welcome the diversity of opinions, interests, and viewpoints the organization is not naturally capturing. Then, make decisions, policies, programs, services that represent all of Wilkinsburg.

## **8) MAKE THE PENN LINCOLN LOCATION A SUCCESS**

### ***Problem***

The demolition of the Penn Lincoln Hotel was a controversial action. Although the building was beyond the economic feasibility for investment, many were upset to see the historic building destroyed. On the other side of the debate, many find the demolition a great benefit to the business district as it removed a visibly blighted building from eyesight and opened up the view from Penn Avenue. The Business District Revitalization Plan had identified the Penn Lincoln as a large-scale visible project.

### ***Solution***

Having formally hosted a building of community significance the Penn Lincoln Hotel site still garners a lot of attention and many are curious about the future of this site. Although the Penn Lincoln itself cannot be the highly visible project identified in the plan, the location can still serve in this role. Securing development for this site would support the image of Wilkinsburg and satisfy the hopes of the community.

## **9) REVIST THE BOROUGH MANAGEMENT STUDY**

### ***Problem***

The Management Study conducted with The Wilkinsburg Plan provides an extensive view on how Borough resources are being managed and effectively deployed. The Management Study was reviewed and investigated as part of this process and many of the tasks were found to be outstanding. Some of the Borough Directors did not know of the study recommendations although there was agreement that many of stated actions would be useful, if it could be implemented.

### *Solution*

With a transitioning Borough Manager, the timing is perfect for fresh eyes to review existing systems and processes within the Borough departments. Fresh eyes, conversations, and familiarity with the study would allow for outstanding and relevant actions to be identified as well as new actions which may need to be created. The action plans in the Management Study could then be used as a resource and assist the Borough in addressing efficiency of operations.

## **10) ASSIGN ADVOCACY FOR SUSTAINABILITY**

### *Problem*

Sustainability was a large part of the Business District Revitalization Plan and was mentioned throughout the Comprehensive Plan. Although clearly a priority for the Borough, progress has not been significant. This makes sense as sustainability programs can be costly and therefore considered a secondary concern. The mind set appears to be “the sustainability feature would be nice but we the budget is tight and we need the basic features first”. This is not surprising and no one should be faulted for wishing to meet community needs. However there is an opportunity for sustainability to be a driver of development instead of second thought.

### *Solution*

Identifying a responsible party for advocating for sustainability would allow sustainability concerns to remain a priority if the oversight and corresponding promotion is successfully maintained. Recommendations could be made on policies or creative sustainability solutions could be used as a tool for finding funding and grants.

Secondly, the Sustainability Assessment created for Wilkesburg should be assigned to an individual for review and implementation as the assessment includes recommendations that coincide with the recommendations in The Wilkesburg Plan.

## **Conclusion**

The actions identified in this document are intended to help the system of Wilkesburg to continue to progress. Words on a page, they mean nothing if not discussed and adopted with the stakeholders and leaders of Wilkesburg. Mainly challenges AND many opportunities lie ahead. With the right strategy in place, Wilkesburg can tackle these issues to reach the vision created with and for the community. Hopefully, this document and the ideas put forth assist in getting Wilkesburg to this spot.