

The Wilkinsburg Plan

HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES ADDENDUM 2015

Table of Contents

The Project	3
Introduction	4
<i>PROCESS</i>	4
Relation to The Wilkinsburg Plan.....	5
<i>TRANSPORTATION</i>	5
<i>HOUSNG</i>	6
<i>SAFETY</i>	6
Recommendations	7
<i>COORDINATION</i>	7
<i>IDENTIFY PARTNERSHIPS FOR IMPLEMENTATION SUPPORT</i>	7
<i>ADDRESS SERVICE GAPS</i>	8

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 and 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

Health and human services play an important role in community development by addressing the basic needs not satisfied within the existing state of the community. In The Wilkinsburg Plan, health and human services were not discussed in detail. Service organizations are mentioned as part of the Community Facilities and Services strategy. One that discusses providing comprehensive information of community services, and a second that recommends organizing civic groups to assist with implementation of the plan and provide ongoing delivery of volunteer services.

As part of the update to this plan, a review of health and human services was conducted in order to better understand how the services impact The Wilkinsburg Plan as well as how residents needs are met or not met by service organizations. By looking at Wilkinsburg through the service lens, more insight was gained to understand The Wilkinsburg Plan as well.

It was found that Wilkinsburg is greatly impacted by the multitude of service organizations operating in Wilkinsburg/for Wilkinsburg residents and the needs that are being served relate to some of the same needs being addressed in the plan. Although in different realms (public policy vs. human services) both viewpoints are interested in uplifting Wilkinsburg and its residents to be safe, healthy, and economically successful with access to quality education. Additionally, the organizations providing the health and human services are very much impacted by the state of Wilkinsburg and therefore have an investment in the community. Whether services are housing families in the Borough, bringing visitors into the Borough, or making it possible for residents to live healthily within the Borough, they directly impact the same market identified in The Wilkinsburg Plan. In all, everyone is part of the same community struggle.

PROCESS

Through a process of interviewing various stakeholders, multiple opinions and perspectives were considered in the creation of this document. While a multitude of individuals were contacted for interviews, not every stakeholder could be reached. The breakdown of contributors includes: 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. Additional research about service options was conducted online and checked to ensure the accuracy of information.

The result of this process has led to the creation of this document as well as a resource document listing the service agencies, services provided, contact information and identified leads from where to start the process of getting the desired services.

Relation to The Wilkinsburg Plan

Although health and human services do not appear to belong in a Borough-wide public policy plan, service organizations are key members of the community. Not only do they bring outsiders into the Borough, they also support those within the community. A strong and safe community goes beyond the policies in place and depends on the overall security and quality of life at the individual level. Wilkinsburg is rich in health and human service organizations and despite not being heavily addressed in the plan, services play a key part in advancing The Wilkinsburg Plan by strengthening individuals who strengthen and contribute to the community.

Through interviews with representatives from various service organizations it became clear that health and human service providers share interest with The Wilkinsburg Plan. To highlight those similar interests the most mentioned interests are explained below.

TRANSPORTATION

As a walking community, Wilkinsburg residents are greatly impacted by the transportation network to internal and external services. Service organizations identified Wilkinsburg's location as a strength as it is easy for many to access. But transportation was also identified as a challenge when clients are recommended to go to another agency outside of town. The difficulty stems from costly cash bus fares, unreliable bus times, and difficulty accessing the busway as a Wilkinsburg pedestrian. These concerns would be addressed by some of the Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) tasks identified in the plan.

Transportation for those who cannot easily walk around the Borough was also identified as a transportation concern for those with mobility impaired clients. With limited or no public transportation to areas outside of the busway (especially the steeped slopes of Wilkinsburg), elderly residents or any resident with a disability find it difficult to get around. A partial solution is the jitneys that operate around town. While they are serving a need, some view their services as a nuisance, categorizing their work in the business district as loitering - making the businesses unattractive to potential customers. For this reason, action 4A.5 of The Comprehensive Plan "Explore ways to legitimize and organize a formal taxi service and/or shuttle system to service local resident needs, respecting the importance of the services to residents" becomes important.

Similarly, pedestrian transportation is frequently a concern for those servicing the youth of the Wilkinsburg. Unsafe pedestrian paths as well as lack of lighting were identified as dangers that make it harder for young people to use their services and are also directly mentioned in the Comprehensive Plan.

HOUSING

Housing interests impact service organizations in a variety of ways. Some may house clients in Wilkinsburg as part of their programs. Others may provide homeownership tools or home repairs. And yet others are influenced by the appearance of the neighborhoods around them. Either way, the existing state of blight in the community challenges service programs. One organization stated Wilkinsburg is a great community for their clients due to the connectivity it offers and the number of services available. That same organization desired to assist their clients in moving into the Borough but is not always able to do so due to the lack of quality, up-to-code housing.

Additionally, services that are dedicated to homeownership and home repairs have found it difficult to serve Wilkinsburg due to the lack of a strong community partner to assist them in navigating housing concerns. Those same organizations struggle to encourage home ownership in the Borough, as the high tax burden would make housing unaffordable for low-income clients, even with a financial education and low- or no-interest loan. These are prime examples of how the existing lack of housing leadership and lack of a housing strategy can prevent Wilkinsburg from being supported by nonprofit groups and prevent smart ownership investments, especially for low-income individuals and families.

Housing and neighborhoods are one of the biggest focuses of The Wilkinsburg Plan and all three of those housing concerns are addressed in the plan and this update.

SAFETY

As mentioned in regards to transportation, the movement of young people throughout the community is an interest for youth-servicing organizations. Walking to and from home, school, after school programs, and social activities requires not only the pedestrian transportation infrastructure but also a sense of safety that would allow parents to feel comfortable with their children walking around the community. More than one organization stated that youth participation dropped as the days get shorter and darker due to the trepidation parents feel in allowing their children to walk home through a dark Wilkinsburg. While others may argue they feel perfectly safe moving throughout the community, the lack of evening activity and lighting provides a seemingly isolated and dark atmosphere. One plan-identified solution that could address this interest is the attraction of businesses like residents, which would draw in people and lighting for evening and nighttime hours. Better pathway lighting would also be an action that would then serve these service interests as well.

Recommendations

COORDINATION

During the interview process, nearly every organization spoken to identified a desire to have better communication and coordination with other service groups. The reasoning behind these statements is vast: to avoid scheduling conflicts, to be better able to support clients through referrals, to identify where and what times services are not available, to better understand how to conduct outreach and increase service numbers, and to increase a sense of community within the Borough. Therefore the priority recommendation for the Wilkinsburg health and human service field is to coordinate conversation between the nonprofit groups. This task is difficult as many of the service organizations themselves identify as short-staffed and therefore dedicating time to planning this coordination would be additional, unwanted work. If someone passionate about the project could be identified, however, making the coordination would be beneficial. It actually identified in the Comprehensive Plan in the strategy relabeled as 2G. As part of this strategy to “Organize and empower local volunteers and civic groups to assist with the implementation of the Wilkinsburg Plan, and with the delivery of ongoing volunteer services” action 2G.6 states “schedule quarterly meetings/lunches with nonprofits to understand what each is doing to make sure services aren’t duplicated – gather info from groups and get info out”.

IDENTIFY PARTNERSHIPS FOR IMPLEMENTATION SUPPORT

A second recommendation made in strategy 2G of the Comprehensive plan is to “identify ways that individual volunteers and nonprofit groups can assist in the implementation of the Wilkinsburg Plan”. At first that task may sound unrealistic, as the mission of service organization may not tie directly into needs of the plan. However, as mentioned previously, organizations in Wilkinsburg and servicing Wilkinsburg have investment in the community. This investment could include alternative, indirect ways of supporting The Wilkinsburg Plan. A strong example of this is Hosanna House’s New Foundations Homeless Program. Although New Foundations does not have a direct mission to related to housing development, they do house multiple families in Wilkinsburg through lease agreements. Additionally, Hosanna House has acquired parcels around their building as part of their strategy for growth and at the same time is supporting one of the nine focus neighborhoods identified in the Comprehensive Plan. Another example is Pittsburgh Urban Christian School (PUCS) and the Second United Presbyterian Church of Wilkinsburg both of which have led projects in their neighborhoods,. For instance PUCS applied for and receiving a KABOOM playground grant in 2014.

While there are some great examples of service organizations advancing The Wilkinsburg Plan, there could be many more. Many group leaders are not familiar with the plan but given information and support (possibly in the meeting recommended previously) strong partnerships and impact can be made.

ADDRESS SERVICE GAPS

Part of the health and human services review was to identify needs in the community that are not currently being served. Although a data-driven service analysis was not conducted, gaps were identified by service leaders and residents in 1) youth services 2) employment and 3) senior services.

Youth services are prevalent in Wilkinsburg to a point where it becomes difficult to quantify due to small groups or individuals stepping forward to provide programs, space or opportunities for young people. One clearly perceived gap in serving the youth is the timing of services, and programs for older youth. The timing of youth services is critical to working parents and youth in need of safe places. Many of the organizations operate youth services after school until early evening. But the number of programs after 6:30pm heavily drops. In response to this need, the Boys and Girls Club extended their hours to serve their members until 8:00pm. Weekends, however, see much less involvement, which could be a gap in service for some youth although the size of that youth population is not known. Additionally, programming for older youth (high school) is also identified as a potential gap. Some programs are open to youth up to 17 or 18 but do not capture their interest. Otherwise programs stop at ages 13 or 14. Either way, a deeper look at the time and age distribution of youth servicing organizations could help identify the gaps and close throughout youth services.

Employment services are perhaps the strongest identified need perceived not being met within Wilkinsburg. Job preparedness support like resume writing, job placement support, and stronger employment opportunities with Wilkinsburg businesses were all identified as areas more service is needed. Support for those with criminal backgrounds, seniors, and those with disabilities are also identified as a need. Employment services do exist within and outside of the Borough however those within Wilkinsburg are not open to all residents and those outside of the Borough may not be known or fully utilized. An assessment of these services followed by sharing information to community members could be an easy first step in closing the service gap.

Lastly, the gap in senior services is largely focused around a lack of senior activities. With no senior center, senior residents may have little to do and therefore have little interaction within the community. This also effects communication and the ability to share information around existing and upcoming services. The lack of communication is further worsened by the seniors' limited connectivity to electronic media, and communications such as The Sun no longer being delivered by mail. With limited communication and no gathering point, seniors are left isolated from the community as they may struggle with limited income, accessibility issues, home repair needs, or daunting decisions around which bills and medicines to pay. More senior activities within the Borough could be the first step in addressing this gap as a tool to build community, identify additional needs, and build connections to services.