

A Renaissance For Whom? Youngstown And Its Neighborhoods

By John Russo and James Rhodes

For what does it profit a city to gain a few jobs and forfeit its neighborhoods? (With apologies to Mark 8:36)

Much has been written recently about Youngstown's Renaissance. *Fox News, BBC, The Economist, Entrepreneur, and Inc.* have all touted the local area as recovering economically, and several have called it one of the best places in the country to do business. While all the publicity and positive representations have been great for the city's self-image and provided much-needed momentum for economic development, both local leaders and most journalists have ignored the city's real problems: high unemployment, poverty, continued high crime rates, and the deterioration of the Youngstown's neighborhoods. Some local commentators feel pressure not to voice their doubts about whether new technology businesses will save the Youngstown economy and especially their concerns about what's happening in our neighborhoods. Other local advocates claim that even acknowledging the problems will damage the area's emerging image as a tech and advanced manufacturing center. But ignoring the problems doesn't guarantee growth; it helps perpetuate the community's difficulties. It is time to take what is happening in Youngstown's neighborhoods seriously.

A Not So Rosy View

Most national media stories about Youngstown begin with the demise of the steel industry in the late 70s and early 80s. But Youngstown's economic story is not just about what happened to the community several decades ago. Since the beginning of the current recession (December 2008), the Youngstown-Warren area has officially lost around 9,000 jobs. In March 2010, the unemployment rate hit 14% with over 38,300 people unemployed. The Valley's unemployment rate has been among the highest in Ohio. A large proportion of the local population has experienced a spell of unemployment, seen their wages and benefits cut, or has been forced to work part-time or into early retirement. National jobless data indicates that the typical unemployed worker has been jobless for six months or more. With economists forecasting continuing high levels of structural unemployment well into the future, it's obvious that the local economy will not be recovering anytime soon. In fact, the situation is likely to get worse.

As savings and unemployment benefits run out, the Mahoning Valley, like the nation at large, is in the midst of major social and economic upheaval. Long-term unemployment contributes to drug abuse, crime, domestic violence, health problems, the break-up of families, and racial antagonisms. Community support institutions are besieged by requests for help even as their economic support - whether from donations or state funds - is declining. Citing data from four social service agencies, the Catholic Diocese of Youngstown reports a 32% increase in the

total number of people served, a 57% increase in requests for utility assistance (water and gas), and a 45% increase in the number of people requesting food assistance. At this critical juncture, the Diocese also found that several community agencies already have exhausted their yearly emergency assistance allocation.

As the overall standard of living of local residents has decreased and Youngstown's population declined, local retailers have struggled or closed. Most recently, the closing of Union Square Sparkle leaves only four grocery stores in the city. As a result, many poor, immobile, and elderly residents as well as university students have become increasingly dependent on convenience or drug stores for groceries -- not exactly places where you will find the fresh food necessary for a healthy diet. The Mahoning Valley Organizing Collaborative's Corner Store Campaign is trying to work with local store owners to improve the situation, but for the moment, healthy food options in the city are limited, and that undermines the long-term well-being of city residents.

Finally, the collapse in the housing market undermines the overall wealth of local working families. At least, it is estimated that as many as 20% of home mortgages are "underwater" and that foreclosures have increased dramatically. With 4,000 homes in foreclosure or delinquency, the local housing market is worse than the national and state average. Further, many home owners are trapped in what's called a "shadow inventory" of houses. They cannot afford to sell their homes in the current market, and banks are unwilling to undercut current market prices by flooding the market with homes in foreclosure. Youngstown has 22,000 vacant parcels of land. With so many vacant homes, arson has increased even as local public safety forces are at historically low levels. The high rates of vacancy also lead to criminal activity, with empty houses being sites of vandalism, dumping, and drug dealing.

The housing crisis in Youngstown has been dire enough to shift the balance between rental properties and owner-occupied dwellings. A community once known as the "City of Homes," with among the highest rates of home ownership in the nation, now has more renters than home owners. Many renters take good care of the homes they live in, but in general, when rental properties dominate the market in an economically depressed city, the value of the housing stock drops and whole streets can become wastelands. Significant numbers of those properties are owned by absentee landlords, many of whom live out of state. This is a particular concern for city residents, as the failure to manage properties effectively leads to poor maintenance, a reluctance or inability to adequately screen tenants, as well as higher rates of vacancy, as many landlords have simply sat on empty properties.

These problems rarely surface in reports on Youngstown's economic development, nor do new businesses in downtown do much to address the conditions in the city's neighborhoods or to increase employment opportunities for those who are out of work. That's true not only in the city but also in the middle ring suburbs, where working and middle class workers are also struggling to find work. For many of

those living in the area, poverty, not development, dominates daily life. Today with fewer work opportunities and good paying jobs, the prospects for city residents and children are very different compared to the 1960s and 1970s, and even the 1980s and 1990s in most neighborhoods.

City Government and Neighborhoods

Much national attention has been given to Youngstown 2010 and its concept of "shrinking cities." But shrinking has proven difficult to enact; long-time, responsible residents of deteriorating neighborhoods often don't want to move. They want more and better city services to stabilize their neighborhoods. Without a workable plan and stronger leadership, Youngstown's shrinking has been uneven, and it's hard to see significant change. Perhaps that's why some local leaders began last year to describe Youngstown 2010 as "a journey instead of a destination."

City and county governments need to address local problems more effectively. Mayor Jay Williams has done an admirable job in the face of tremendous difficulties. But by hiring his friends, the Mayor has too often put people without strong qualifications in charge of important local work. We shouldn't be surprised when they fail to get things done right. To many, city offices seem to be plagued by ineptitude and deficiency. The city has just one housing inspector. Because no single computerized system gives clear information on demolitions, no individual can easily access the information, so residents have little confidence that anything is being done regarding vacant properties. The process of demolition too has been painfully slow. While approximately 1,500 demolitions have taken place as part of the 2010 Plan, it is estimated that as many as 4,000 vacant properties still need to be taken down. Similarly, despite an election promise in 2005, it has taken the Mayor over five years to introduce the landlord registration scheme. In a city losing population and experiencing neighborhood deterioration, this is simply not good enough. Inaction and ineptitude have caused great damage to the city.

Yes, local resources are scarce, but they should be targeted to housing inspections, demolition of abandoned properties, and crime. Blockwatches and neighborhood organizations are growing, in part because residents feel they must fill in where local government is not addressing the issues. Recently, for example, blockwatch leaders in Brownlee Woods have floated the idea of taxing themselves in order to pay for more policing.

The Mahoning Valley Organizing Collaborative and its many neighborhood associations have become the de facto community planning agency, but neither the Mayor nor county government leaders regularly attend community meetings. Some city council members, too, are often absent. Their absence sends the message that either they don't know or don't care about the needs of people in the neighborhoods. Area residents need to believe that local government is doing everything possible to protect neighborhoods. Indeed, greater accountability and transparency is needed throughout the administration of the city. The fact that the

MVOC- an organization largely funded through the Wean Foundation and existing independently of the city- is taking the lead and doing much of the positive work in the city neighborhoods speaks volumes about the weakness of city government. While the Youngstown Neighborhood Development Corporation is also involved in invaluable neighborhood work, it is only partially funded through the city and was only established as recently as 2009, despite the long-term need for such an organization.

Stabilization and sustainability are important to restoring Youngstown neighborhoods. While some neighborhoods are becoming safer, such as the Oak Hill area, the change stems from the demolition of vacant houses and the fact that the population is becoming older and more stable. You only have to look at the age profile of those attending blockwatch meetings to see that many of the remaining homeowners in the city are older, 45-50 and above. These residents are those who benefited from a more favorable labor market and a better education system for their children. The poor state of the school system is a key reason why the city is failing to attract younger families to its neighborhoods. This is stabilization through an absence of people rather than through the development of thriving, young neighborhood.

One step toward creating more vibrant neighborhoods would be developing strong small businesses, especially minority-owned companies. On a trip to India a few years ago, students and faculty from YSU's Williamson College of Business Administration witnessed how microeconomies were flourishing in even the most impoverished areas of Mumbai. The growth of small businesses has in turn helped to stabilize those parts of the city. We've all heard local residents reminisce about when downtown Youngstown was thriving, but we forget that during the city's heyday, small businesses also thrived on Hillman and Market Street, Glenwood and South Avenue, among others. They served their local communities and helped maintain neighborhoods. In other deindustrialized cities, new immigrants have provided new energy to economic development through microeconomies. But with the exception of a few areas in Campbell where the Mexican community has put down roots, that is not happening here and may reflect Youngstown's problems of race and class. But without the encouragement and financial support of local banks and business leaders, microeconomies are unlikely to grow and support neighborhoods.

The area must overcome decades of resistance to restructure local government. Despite the declining population, Youngstown still has seven wards. The bickering and turf battles among City Councilmen and the Mayor waste time and fragment planning efforts during this critical period in Youngstown's history. Yet city leaders are unwilling to address the redefinition of city wards, primarily because of issues of race and political cronyism. Likewise, Mahoning County's population has shrunk from 258,000 in 2000 to an estimated 236,000 people. The county is now smaller than many urban centers that have a single local government. Mahoning County is highly balkanized, and consolidation is not even

being discussed, again primarily because of racial divides. A few Joint Economic Development Districts have been negotiated, but those efforts have been hard-fought, and most suburban communities in the Valley reject that option, even though it's been shown to work well in similar areas, such as Akron.

A Tale of Two Cities

Youngstown is an increasingly divided city. On the one hand, we can see Youngstown's Renaissance in the thriving restaurants downtown, the success of the business incubator, and the growth of the university. But the remainder of the city is merely surviving. Even as successful neighborhood groups plant gardens and keep blockwatches going, for too many local residents, having safe housing and healthy food is a daily effort, a struggle made all the more challenging amid fear of being shot or robbed.

That is why the most pressing issue for Youngstown and the Mahoning Valley is the economic stabilization of its neighborhoods. We need to improve the standard of living in these neighborhoods. Imagine what could happen if the creative, educated, technically sophisticated, and energetic young professionals who are advocating downtown development and our government officials made neighborhood revitalization a priority? They must understand that changing the image of Youngstown will not save the city unless the material conditions of most residents also improve. And so far, those conditions are getting worse, not better.

But the responsibility for the revitalization of Youngstown doesn't rest only with the elected, appointed, and volunteer cadre behind the Renaissance. The University, the local media, and community groups must also play their roles. Ohio Chancellor of Education, Eric Fingerhut, has recently labeled YSU an "urban research university." So far, University leaders have interpreted that to mean promoting research in areas like advanced materials and biochemistry, research that brings in federal research dollars to YSU and may eventually help create new area businesses. YSU has not invested resources in research on the problems of the local community, on fighting crime and urban blight, on breaking down long-standing barriers of race and class - though a number of our colleagues are pursuing just that kind of research. Without more of that kind of "urban research," the community and the University will remain divided. Happily, new YSU President Cynthia Anderson and Hunter Morrison, Director of Campus Planning and Community Development, understand, and they are pushing for greater community engagement by faculty and staff.

The local media could also do more. Some of the best reports in *The Vindicator* over the last year have been researched and written by students working with TheNewsOutlet.org, sponsored by the YSU Journalism program - stories about MVOC's neighborhood efforts, patterns of media coverage of local shootings, problems in Youngstown City Schools, and the disputed claims regarding job growth. A recent investigative report by Grace Wyler on a possible new steel mill in

Campbell shows that the Vindy recognizes the value of that kind of reporting. More critical, intelligent, insightful coverage of local issues will improve residents' understanding of key issues and put pressure on government officials to act responsibly.

Local residents also have to get involved, and many are. MVOC has helped to establish community groups and blockwatch programs that have itemized the city's problems and are now organizing actions. The proliferation of community groups is indicative of the capability of this community to move beyond complaining about current conditions. At the same time, those local groups should work more directly with city and county governments. One of the underlying principles of community organizing is that there is power in numbers. Creating community gardens is important, but so is showing up at city council and county commissioners' meetings and sitting down face-to-face to demand change. Strong neighborhood groups can put pressure on local government to become more proactive in improving the daily life in Youngstown neighborhoods.

Like local boosters, we celebrate all the activity and excitement of downtown's redevelopment. Attracting new businesses does contribute to the local economy. Of course promoting a new image of Youngstown supports the economic revitalization of the city, and it may encourage residents to once again believe in their hometown as a place of possibility. But neither downtown development nor boosterism is enough. The 'Renaissance' of Youngstown will not be complete until the new professionals coming here don't just want to work downtown but also choose to live in the city. So far, few "new Youngstowners," have settled in the city. Neither will the Renaissance be achieved until the city provides better social and economic conditions for those already in the neighborhoods. A successful Youngstown will be a place where success is shared, and the lives of the majority improve, not just the few. A vibrant city needs vibrant neighborhoods, not just a downtown.

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