

CORKTOWN: A NEIGHBORHOOD PROFILE

“Livability means a community where you can take kids to school, go to work, see a doctor, go to the grocery store, have dinner and a movie, and play with your kids in a park, all without having to get into a car.” Ray LaHood, Secretary of Department of Transportation

“Often people from the government, from labor unions, from the businesses, people who work with community centers for young people, they had never met in a conversation where they are trying to create something together. When they met, they had to fight about something. This is an opportunity for people to say ‘hey, we have to come together and co-create an opportunity here for our community.’” -Van Jones, 2008 Interview about the green movement in urban communities

INTRODUCTION

Detroit is on the cusp of historic changes. Van Jones got it right in the quote above, cooperation and “co-creation” are necessary for community development to be successful. This neighborhood profile is an invitation to decision-makers to assist us in the “co-creation” of our community.

For the purposes of this neighborhood profile, Corktown’s boundaries are Martin Luther King Boulevard on the north, Porter Street on the south, M10 (the Lodge) on the east and 16th Street on the west.* Corktown has approximately 4,500 residents with racial distribution of 40% African American, 40% Caucasian and 20 % Latino – making it one of Detroit’s most diverse communities.** Our residents are doctors, lawyers, activists, urban farmers, artists, secretaries, yoga masters and wonderful everyday people. While Corktown faces many of the same challenges as other Detroit communities, it has weathered the economic crises surprisingly well. There have been only 2-4 home foreclosures in Corktown each year since the housing crisis and these homes are quickly re-occupied due to the high demand for homes in Corktown. However, Corktown’s continued stability is attributable to the character of Corktowners much more than the rate of housing foreclosures and demand for housing in Corktown. In 2009, Corktowners donated over \$250,000 dollars of their time to ensure that the community remains

safe and clean. Many of these hours were spent keeping our public spaces maintained and our streets safe. Corktown’s proximity to Wayne State University, downtown Detroit, Mexicantown and the Detroit River make it a highly appealing place to live, work and play.

This document contains a “district” vision for our community. This vision arose organically from the people based upon the existing built environment and the people’s opinions with regard to future uses. To borrow directly from the Futures Task Force of the Community Development Advocates of Detroit (CDAD), our districts are the “classifications” suggested in CDAD’s “Neighborhood Revitalization Strategic Framework” published in February 2010. These districts are the organic “indicators” described in the above plan. Finally, our neighborhood profile reflects the “triple bottom line” concept meaning that we treat each other as we’d like to be treated and continuously seek to uphold environmental integrity and economic prosperity.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

This document is the result of over two years of extensive work to engage ALL of our community members. We use ALL in all capitalization because community engagement must include everyone, not

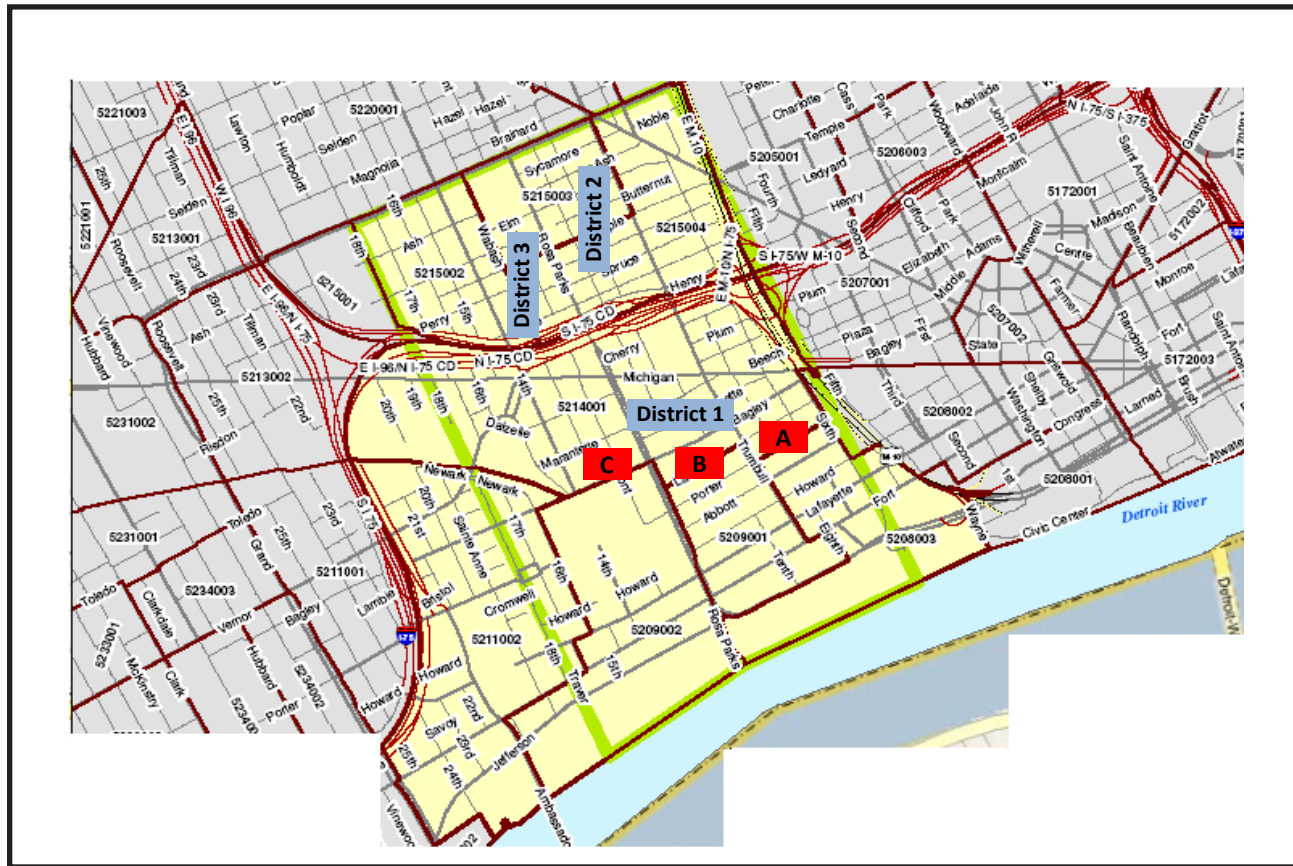
* Actual borders, as defined by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, extend to I-96, however, working borders for the purpose of this document are described as above. Outlying areas not mentioned will be included in future community engagement plans.

** Data provided by Data Driven Detroit

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CORKTOWN

BOUNDARY



MAP

** Map provided by Data Driven Detroit

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just the “leadership”. We strongly support the CDAD report’s assertion that community organizing, education and engagement are fundamentally important to a community and should align with the realistic direction a neighborhood is moving in. Ultimately, Corktowners recognizes that social equity and long-term sustainability can only be achieved through the effort of engaged residents. Therefore, in order to involve the community, over 10 residents were individually interviewed for this document. Additionally, Corktown’s strong commitment to community involvement is demonstrated by the following:



- ❑ Districts use a bottom-up approach to community development, planning, and decision-making
- ❑ The Corktown Residents’ Council has implemented beautification, maintenance and safety programs, developed a vacant property action team, and holds monthly Residents’ Council meetings (40-50 average attendees) all in an effort to keep the community engaged and aware of issues and events; and,
- ❑ In 2009, Corktown residents donated in excess of \$250,000 in “in-kind” volunteer time. In the future, the community will continue to drive volunteer efforts targeting key projects that promote a livable and sustainable Corktown

Clearly, Corktown embraces the value of a diverse community unifying for a common goal as described by Van Jones in the opening quote of this document. Furthermore, Corktown has already achieved “authen-

tic participation” by encouraging all residents to have a voice in community happenings.

DEFINING CORKTOWN DISTRICTS

Corktown is composed of three primary districts:

- ❑ District 1: the Corktown Historic District - located south of Michigan Avenue, north of Porter, west of the Lodge and east of 14th Street, this area is also subdivided into three subdistricts, A, B, & C
- ❑ District 2: the North Corktown region north of Michigan Ave between Rosa Parks and Trumbull
- ❑ District 3: the North Corktown region north of Michigan Avenue between Rosa Parks and 15th Street

Ultimately, the three districts have grown out of pre-existing conditions defined by residential and commercial buildings, the prevalence of vacant property, and the visions of residents. Each district is distinct both in terms of the physical built environment and the diverse community of people residing there. Residents choose to live in a particular district because the district fits their chosen lifestyle or their hopes for the future. Yet, while each district is socially, environmentally and economically unique, a bottom-up approach to decision-making and community planning exists in each whereby residents and community members play an integral role. Residents have strong opinions regarding the neighborhood they live in, as evident by this neighborhood profile, and continuously seek to make sure that their voice is heard. Furthermore, maintaining a stable, safe, and clean neighborhood is the foundation of each district’s vision. These three elements are the backbone of the com-

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munity and residents work relentlessly to ensure that they are upheld.

DISTRICT 1

The primary goals of the Historic District include the following:

- Strategies cited for “Traditional Residential Sectors” classification of the CDAD report match the needs of sub-districts A, B & C
- Continue efforts that increase overall stabilization
- Retain the historic nature of the houses and buildings

The Historic District, highly dense and impeccably maintained, is one of Detroit’s oldest residential neighborhoods. Many of the homes and structures in the district were built during the mid-1800’s and although many have been rehabilitated and/or renovated they have retained their historic exterior architecture. The built environment and current needs of the district vary slightly among District A, B and C. Districts A and B include a unique collection of historically pristine and well manicured homes, each with authentic personality and charm. Vacant property and blight are minimal in this area of the district. District C, although just as dense, contains more blight and incidents of crime tend to be higher, but residents are equally invested in maintaining a clean, safe, and stable neighborhood. District C would benefit from future activity that generates more stabilization. While its engaged, civic-minded resi-



dents are the Historic Districts primary anchor, others include Most Holy Trinity Parish, Slows Bar B Que, and Mudgies Deli. The district is made up of a diverse community of residents, many of whom have lived in Corktown for many years. There is a strong sense of community among residents who are supportive and helpful of one another. Walking and biking is very popular among residents and the community strongly supports the future addition of bike lanes and bike racks.

“I’d love to see more amenities provided for residents along Michigan Avenue. Locally-owned restaurants, bars, bakeries, wireless tea/coffee cafes, grocery stores with fresh produce, a tool bank where people can share tools. I don’t want to drive to the suburbs to access these amenities.”

-Barb Prusak, 60, Historic District Resident

DISTRICT 2

The primary goals of District 2 include the following:

- Strategies cited for “Traditional Residential Sectors” classification of the CDAD report match the needs of this community
- Increase density via infill housing
- Continue efforts that increase stabilization

District 2 is filled with many hidden gems. Well-manicured pocket parks distributed throughout the district provide charm and attractiveness. The neighborhood has a good reputation and has relatively low crime. The houses range in a variety of colors and architectural styles and many are new or recently renovated. Nonetheless, there are a number of vacant lots in this district. Residents strongly support new hous-

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ing and the addition of more parks. In fact, new homeowners purchased homes in the district envisioning that it would increase in density such that there would be a single-family house on almost every lot. Thus, residents strongly embrace infill housing since there is plenty of space for it. Presently, 29 infill houses have already been built, but more is needed in order to give residents the high density,

city-like environment that they desire.

“Increased density will bring several benefits. It will improve safety since there will be more eyes watching the street. Also, it will improve pedestrian traffic - people will be more likely to walk around.”

-Jean Claude Lewis, Resident of District 2

DISTRICT 3

The primary goals of District 3 include the following:

- Strategies cited for “Naturescapes” and “Green Venture Zones” classifications of the CDAD report fit the needs of this district
- Preserve country-side environment and expand upon “country-like” amenities
- Avoid any new development in the form of built structures

The pheasant is a regular visitor to this district and a prime representative of the country-like environment present here. The district offers beautiful, low-maintenance natural landscapes that support a variety of wildlife. The greenspace, some of which have already been converted into urban farms, gardens and pocket parks, is truly the defining characteristic of the district. Thus, residents disagree with any development that would have an adverse impact on the wildlife or greenspace. Rather, similar to the “Naturescapes” and “Green Venture Zones” classifications, they would like to see more productive use of the current land in the form of pastures, aquaponics, orchards, and flower/tree farms. Thus, the main goal of the district is to build upon and improve management of the current



infrastructure and green space and preserve the existing “country” atmosphere. Yet, unlike the “Naturescapes” and “Green Venture Zones” classifications, residents are an important component of this district. The district attracts a diverse community of people who seek to escape the hustle and bustle of a major city. The primary anchors in the district are Brother Nature Farm, a large urban farm located on Rosa Parks, Spaulding Court, which is under rehabilitation as a multi-unit apartment complex, and Burton International, a skillman high-performing school. Upon reopening, Burton International will function as an open-campus fusing together the school grounds and the community.

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MICHIGAN AVENUE, SURROUNDING AREAS TO THE NORTH AND SOUTHWEST OF CORKTOWN



The three districts coalesce in a common vision for Michigan Avenue. They desire a vibrant, lively and economically prosperous corridor that includes a mix of restaurants, bars, and retail. Currently, Michigan Avenue offers a variety of establishments that host up-and-coming bands and restaurants varying in different types of cuisine. Michigan Avenue has a very engaged and invested business community that is eager to contribute and assist in the community. Building upon partnerships with current and future businesses will greatly benefit all three districts. Not only will these businesses increase economic prosperity, they will provide more job opportunities and amenities, making Corktown a more walkable and livable self-contained community. Therefore, Michigan Avenue can fuse together social equity, environmental integrity, and economic prosperity.

Additionally, the more interconnectedness that exists among Detroit's neighborhoods the more likely the entire City will prosper. Thus, just as Michigan Avenue brings the Corktown community together, our connectedness to Southwest Detroit (Mexicantown) and Woodbridge to the north will contribute to the cre-

"Corktown has tremendous opportunity for authenticity. A lot of cities are trying to replicate cities like New Orleans because it has authenticity. Corktown can be a model for this. It's up to the community to define who we are."

-Phil Cooley, Partner of Slows Bar B Que

ation of a corridor of vibrant, healthy Detroit neighborhoods.

MICHIGAN AND TRUMBULL & ADJACENT / CONNECTED AREAS

The redevelopment of the vacant lot at the corner of Michigan and Trumbull - which is the former site for the Detroit Tigers baseball team - presents a wonderful opportunity to rebuild, reenergize and renew our Detroit neighborhood. This site, the adjacent parking lots south of I-75 and the empty lots north of I-75 sit empty, desolate and almost desert-like. If the Old Tiger Stadium site is redeveloped and if the plan envisions a project that seeks to re-connect Corktown's divided halves, the wonderfully vibrant neighborhood that once existed (prior to the imposition of the community destroying Interstate 75) can be resurrected. In fact, over 100 volunteer hours by community members and thousands of dollars have already been invested to improve the pedestrian overpass that connects the divided community with the explicit intention of reconnecting the two communities.

Alternatively, if this site is redeveloped in such a way that the community's needs, hopes and desires are ignored, North Corktown (69% African American) will be again cut off and isolated from the economic development and prosperity that is present south of I-75 in Corktown. Furthermore, the fissure created by unhealthy development at the Michigan / Trumbull site will sever the interconnectedness necessary for vibrant, healthy communities.

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ROOSEVELT PARK REDEVELOPMENT DISTRICT

The large grassy area directly in front of the Michigan Central Station is known as Roosevelt Park. This Park and the surrounding buildings and vacant lots represent a Roosevelt Park Redevelopment District. This important area of Corktown connects our community to Southwest Detroit and Mexicantown. The redevelopment of this park and the adjacent structures will further form the sense of interconnectedness necessary for humans / neighborhoods to thrive.

CONCLUSION

Essentially, this is a “talking points” document arising out of community engagement. While the strategies outlined in the CDAD report entail a long term process of change, Corktown is ready to implement the activities listed in this neighborhood profile now. Corktown is home to a diverse community of people. It’s made up of three distinct districts that each have their own unique strengths as well as their own needs. Corktown will continue to move in the direction of building upon its current assets while also striving to achieve social equity, environmental integrity, and economic prosperity.

THANK YOU TO THE FOLLOWING COLLABORATORS:

- COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ADVOCATES OF DETROIT (CDAD)
- COMMUNITY LEGAL RESOURCES (CLR)
- GREENING OF DETROIT
- SOUTHWEST DETROIT DEVELOPMENT COLLABORATIVE (SDDC)
- SUSTAINABLE DESIGN ASSESSMENT TEAM (SDAT)



THIS DOCUMENT WAS PREPARED BY:

THE CORKTOWN RESIDENTS' COUNCIL