

**City of Wichita
West Hilltop Facilitation Project
Final Report**

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I. Executive Summary

In December, 2006, the City of Wichita initiated a project to determine the nature and extent of support for neighborhood revitalization among residents and other stakeholders of the West Hilltop neighborhood. Located in southeast Wichita in City Council District 3, this neighborhood is bordered on the south and north by Harry and Lincoln Streets respectively, and on the east and west by Oliver and Bluffview Streets respectively.

The project was completed in three phases beginning in late December, 2006 and ending in March 2007:

1. Individual stakeholder interviews
2. Focus group interviews with key stakeholder groups
3. Neighborhood-wide meeting

General Project Findings

1. Hilltop is strongly valued as a community by many of its residents, especially homeowners, a majority of whom have lived in the neighborhood for many years.
2. Many Hilltop residents, especially those who rent their homes, face difficult challenges as the result of substandard, unsafe or abandoned housing; inadequate infrastructure; poverty; hunger; higher incidents of crime; resident transience and in some cases, unresponsive landlords.
3. The Hilltop neighborhood while facing serious limitations of economic resources, is rich in social assets for addressing the needs of many of its residents.
4. Unfavorable economic circumstances among individual stakeholders serve as barriers for change for many property owners and others who would like to own their own homes.
5. Until recently, Hilltop residents have had a successful history of working with their neighbors and community partners for neighborhood betterment, and can point with justifiable pride to many neighborhood improvements.
6. The vast majority of stakeholders participating in the Hilltop Facilitation Project are not satisfied with the status quo and desire improvements in the neighborhood. They have, however, significant differences over the nature and degree of desired change. Without a higher degree of stakeholder consensus, the City will find it difficult to move forward with some of the more sweeping changes proposed in the 2000 plan for the neighborhood.

In the category of more incremental change, nearly all stakeholders participating in the project desired:

- replacement of water and sewer lines
- either rehabilitation or rapid condemnation of abandoned houses
- additional lighting
- incentives for more home ownership
- continuation of affordable housing

- a neighborhood free of trash
 - a permanent resolution of problems generated by narrow private alleys
 - safer and more attractive housing through stronger code enforcement (nearly all desired this change with the exception of landlords).
7. Most stakeholders acknowledge that progress in developing a vision and goals for neighborhood revitalization has been thwarted over the past several years by serious interpersonal conflicts and rivalries among neighborhood leaders and volunteers.
 8. Stakeholders are appreciative of the City's interest in their neighborhood as symbolized by the 2000 Hilltop Neighborhood Revitalization Plan, and continue to look to the City Council and Council Member Skelton for leadership to bring about neighborhood improvements.

Specific Findings from Focus Group Interviews

Eight focus group interviews were scheduled separately for: the neighborhood association, landlords, parents of school age children, young people, Hilltop Manor (east Hilltop), Hilltop Urban Church members, renters and homeowners.

1. Stakeholder participation was good for the following interviews: the neighborhood association, Hilltop Manor and the Hilltop Urban Church.
2. Stakeholder participation in focus group interviews was low or non-existent for the following interviews: parents with school-age children, renters, landlords, homeowners and young people.
3. Nearly all interviewed agreed that the chief strengths of West Hilltop are the proximity to a variety of public and private services, a sense of community spirit among neighbors and housing affordability.
4. Abandoned and substandard housing, irresponsible landlords, trash, and the poor condition of water and sewer lines were primary concerns for nearly everyone interviewed.
5. Other concerns mentioned with frequency but not shared across all stakeholder groups included problems created by the narrow, private alleys; drug-related crime; economic factors that discourage private investment; and weak enforcement of City codes.
6. Participants from the neighborhood association expressed apprehension that the City's approach to Hilltop might involve demolishing most of the housing stock and displacing residents.
7. Church stakeholders were particularly concerned about the disincentives to private investment that serve as a major barrier to improving housing conditions.
8. Landlords were chiefly concerned about the arbitrary and adversarial nature of the City's code inspection process, as well as present barriers to home ownership.
9. All stakeholder groups shared the goals of replacing water and sewer lines, expanding home ownership and maintaining housing affordability.

10. Hilltop stakeholders have significant divisions over the nature and level of improvements they wish to see in the future:

11. With few exceptions, persons interviewed across all stakeholder groups were in agreement that most of the cost of improvements must be borne by the City at large and/or sources other than Hilltop property owners. In their opinion, low property values, and the fixed or low incomes of residents prohibit use of the property tax for financing improvements.

Specific Findings from Neighborhood-Wide Meeting

Approximately 40 stakeholders, most of whom were Hilltop residents, attended an evening meeting convened by Council Member Skelton to learn of project results and discuss what next steps, if any, were needed to move neighborhood revitalization forward.

1. Participants generally concurred with the strengths of the neighborhood, and the concerns and issues identified by the focus group interviews.
2. There was widespread agreement that the project finding indicating the vast majority of residents are willing to volunteer time for neighborhood betterment is a tremendous asset. (This same finding was reported in a 2006 survey by the police department.)
3. Participants were unanimous in agreeing that improvements in the neighborhood are needed and that they want to move forward with plans for revitalization.
4. Serious interpersonal conflicts and rivalries among neighborhood volunteers and leaders were acknowledged as one reason for the lack of progress in revitalization over the past several years.
5. A majority of those attending indicated support for using an outside facilitator to help residents continue discussions as to how to resolve dysfunctional conflict and find common ground for improving the neighborhood.

Recommendations for Next Steps for Neighborhood Revitalization Planning

All but the first recommendation should be undertaken only after receiving clear evidence that stakeholders have taken steps to improve relationships, unify leadership and identify a common purpose that transcends individual differences.

1. Recruit a volunteer, third-party facilitator who will continue to meet with stakeholders from all factions to establish protocols for constructive interaction and to seek common interests in neighborhood revitalization.
2. Under the leadership of Council Member Skelton, create a Hilltop Revitalization Committee with a mission to consult with stakeholders and work with the City of Wichita to craft the general parameters of a neighborhood revitalization plan.
3. Seek avenues to enable Hilltop stakeholders to remain informed of developments and opportunities to participate in planning for neighborhood revitalization.

II. Project Overview

In December, 2006, the City of Wichita initiated a project to determine the nature and extent of support for neighborhood revitalization among residents and other stakeholders of the West Hilltop neighborhood. Located in southeast Wichita in City Council District 3, this neighborhood is bordered on the south and north by Harry and Lincoln Streets respectively, and on the east and west by Oliver and Bluffview Streets respectively.

Services of The Austin Peters Group, Inc. were secured to recommend a design for consulting with stakeholders and subsequently, to provide leadership for implementing the project and reporting its findings.

The project was completed in three phases:

1) Individual stakeholder interviews: December, 2006 – January, 2007

Information from interviews with eighteen Hilltop stakeholders was used to design the project and build understanding of project goals.

2) Focus group interviews with stakeholder groups: February – March, 2007

Six focus groups were convened for the Hilltop Association for Neighborhood Development; persons who own rental properties; Hilltop Urban Church; parents with school-age children; homeowners; and the board of directors for East Hilltop Manor.

3) Neighborhood-wide meeting: March 15

A neighborhood wide meeting to share project results and continue discussion about revitalization was attended by approximately 40 stakeholders.

This report summarizes the project design and the approach used to communicate with neighborhood residents and others closely associated with them, and the feedback from Hilltop stakeholders. Additionally general findings and recommendations for next steps toward neighborhood revitalization are offered.

III. Focus Group Interviews

Purpose and Methodology

Focus groups were used to gather qualitative information from a small group of persons who were representative of Hilltop stakeholders. The purpose of focus group interviews was to:

- provide user-friendly information about the neighborhood and options for revitalization;
- determine the nature and extent of support for specific options for revitalization (or determine if the status quo is preferred)
- determine the intensity of support or opposition for change.

With the approval of City staff, eight focus group interviews representing different stakeholder groups were scheduled:

- 1) members of the Hilltop Association for Neighborhood Development (HAND)
- 2) residents who are members of the Hilltop Urban Church
- 3) members of the Hilltop Manor Corporation (East Hilltop)
- 4) residents who are teenagers served by one of the neighborhood's faith-based agencies
- 5) landlords of property in the neighborhood
- 6) residents who are homeowners
- 7) residents who are family members with children
- 8) other residents who are renters.

Focus group participants for groups 1-4 were selected using lists provided by those organizations. Twenty-two focus group invitees of homeowners and landlords were selected at random from public property records in the hope of attracting 10-15 persons per group. In total for groups 1-6, approximately 90 personal letters of invitation were sent from Council Member Jim Skelton.

Written invitations to family members of nearly 100 school-age children were made indirectly through the cooperation of Jefferson Elementary School and the neighborhood Head Start program. (Due to constraints of confidentiality, schools could not furnish the names and addresses of parents.) Invitations indicated that child care and translation services would be available, and that pizza and beverages (at the consultant's expense) would be served.

Working with staff at faith-based organizations and neighborhood leaders, numerous efforts were made to obtain names and contact information for property renters. Those efforts did not produce a sufficient number of names, and consequently, a focus group for renters did not occur.

A focus group of young people was scheduled with the cooperation of Hilltop Urban Church, but the day of the scheduled session, all of the attendees informed the youth minister of their plans to attend an alternate activity. The youth focus group was not held or rescheduled.

All focus group interviews occurred in the Hilltop neighborhood, and were managed by project consultants. At most sessions, consultants' furnished pizza and beverages as a gesture of hospitality. Each session lasted approximately 90 minutes. After presenting an initial profile descriptive of the demographic and physical characteristics of the neighborhood, consultants facilitated a structured conversation using the following questions:

1. What are the greatest strengths of the West Hilltop neighborhood that should be preserved?
2. If you had a magic wand to make one change in West Hilltop, what would it be?
3. Thinking about the physical conditions in West Hilltop, what one condition concerns you the most over the next year or two? Over the long term?

Additionally, participants were asked to indicate which of three options for change in Hilltop they preferred: 1) no change; 2) modest changes; or 3) major change. Details of the changes contemplated in options 2 and 3 that were prepared in advance by City staff were presented (see attachment 1).

Finally participants were asked to indicate, using a scale from 1-10, their preference for:

- 1) the degree of change desired in Hilltop, with "1" being no change and "10" being significant change;
- 2) the degree to which the City should pay for improvements rather than Hilltop property owners, with "1" being the City pays none to "10" being the City pays for all improvements.

General Focus Group Findings

1. Stakeholder participation in focus group interviews was adequate for HAND, the neighborhood association, Hilltop Manor and the Hilltop Urban Church.
2. Stakeholder participation in focus group interviews was low or non-existent for parents with school-age children, renters, landlords and homeowners.
3. Nearly all interviewed agree that the chief strengths of West Hilltop are the proximity to a variety of public and private services, the sense of community spirit among neighbors and housing affordability.
4. Abandoned and substandard housing, irresponsible landlords, trash, and poor condition of water and sewer lines were primary concerns for nearly everyone interviewed.
5. Other concerns mentioned with frequency, but not shared across all stakeholder groups, included problems created by the narrow, private alleys; drug-related crime; economic factors that discourage private investment; and weak enforcement of City codes.

6. Participants from the neighborhood association expressed apprehension that the City's approach to Hilltop might involve demolishing most of the housing stock and displacing residents.
7. Church stakeholders were particularly concerned about the disincentives to private investment that serve as a major barrier to improving housing conditions.
8. Landlords were chiefly concerned about the arbitrary and adversarial nature of the City's code inspection process, as well as the barriers to home ownership.
9. All stakeholder groups shared the goals of replacing water and sewer lines, expanding home ownership and maintaining housing affordability.
10. Hilltop stakeholders have significant divisions over the nature and level of improvements they wish to see in the future:
 - church stakeholders unanimously support major, transformative change, believing that modest improvements will not solve the core problems that characterize Hilltop, emphasizing that such change will need to occur gradually and "block by block"
 - nearly all neighborhood association stakeholders favor more incremental change, but have varying ideas as to improvement components
 - east Hilltop stakeholders prefer more modest change with an emphasis on providing incentives for home ownership and maintaining affordable housing
 - landlords interviewed were divided, with two favoring smaller, more incremental improvements and one preferring more wholesale change. One landlord in the former group who owns multiple properties did indicate openness to more extensive change if he could participate in a meaningful partnership with the City.
11. With few exceptions, persons interviewed across all stakeholder groups were in agreement that most of the cost of improvements must be borne by the City at large and/or sources other than Hilltop property owners. In their opinion, low property values, and the fixed or low incomes of residents prohibit use of the property tax for financing improvements.

Findings by Stakeholder Group

1. Hilltop Association for Neighborhood Development (HAND)

Highlights

- Nine (9) participants attended the focus group interview.
- HAND is an incorporated neighborhood association, with membership open to all persons who reside, own property or do business in Hilltop.
- All participants were homeowners, with most having long-term residency (five participants had lived in Hilltop 50 years or more).
- Significant pride in the strong sense of community that characterizes Hilltop was evident.
- A majority of participants want a plan to replace aging water and sewer lines.
- Nearly all participants favored more modest change, but they were not in agreement about what those changes should be.

- Participants voiced major concern about the deteriorating condition of rental properties and irresponsible practices of many landlords.
- Participants are fearful that wholesale change by the City will result in displacement of current residents.
- Several participants distrust the work of faith-based nonprofit organizations in Hilltop and believe they do not act in the best interests of neighborhood.

Strengths of West Hilltop

- Strong sense of community – people willing to lend a hand to their neighbors.
- Unique history and heritage of the neighborhood.
- Friendship Park provides green space and a common area for activities
- The neighborhood association offers a focus on common good and vehicle for problem solving.

Other strengths mentioned, but for which there was not agreement:

- Increasing racial/ethnic diversity of Hilltop
- Community garden (located on Dear Neighbor property)
- Work of faith-based organizations in neighborhood.

Concerns About West Hilltop Physical Conditions

In order of priority, short-term concerns are: 1) trash (problem exacerbated by landlords who don't provide trash service; 2) dilapidated, neglected rental property¹; 3) poor lighting, especially for houses located in alleys; 4) too many people living in one unit which contributes to trash and parking problems.

In order of priority, long-term concerns are: 1) uncertainty that City decisions will be guided by best interests of Hilltop – and fear that the City will condemn all Hilltop properties causing massive resident displacement; 2) lack of incentives for housing rehabilitation and homeownership; 3) irresponsible landlords who buy up property and then neglect it, causing continued downward pressure on all property values; 4) presence of drugs and the crime it precipitates; 5) “red lining” on the part of mortgage-lending institutions creates additional barrier to home ownership.

General Change Desired

Individual aspirations for change included:

- Tearing down or rehabilitating an estimated 25 boarded-up homes
- More constructive activities for children
- Elimination of illegal drug dealers
- Improvements in landlord business practices, e.g., tenant screening, property upkeep and code compliance
- Elimination of interpersonal conflict that keeps Hilltop from realizing improvements.

¹ One example was offered of a landlord who refused to fix the furnace, necessitating tenant to use space heater for warmth. The heater caused the house to burn down; reportedly the landlord threatened to sue tenant.

Level of Change Desired

Eight (8) participants were in substantial agreement that modest change (Plan B) in West Hilltop with modifications, was preferred, but were not in agreement as to the modifications.

- Two persons are opposed to housing development by outside nonprofit organizations.
- One individual does not want houses torn down, but instead rehabilitated.
- Five (5) individuals want to add replacement of water and sewer lines.
- One individual desires street improvements, including addition of more streets.
- Using a scale of 1-10 to measure desire for change (with “1” being no change), responses recording desire for change ranged from “5-7”.

One (1) individual preferred substantial change (Option C) as follows:

- delete addition of streets and redesigned lots.
- desire for change measured at “10”.

Paying for Change

- There was full consensus that property owners should pay for one-half or less of improvements, but , but beyond that, there is also disagreement as to the percentage:
 - three (3) participants think City should pay total cost; and five (5) said the City should pay for 80 percent or more of total cost.
 - one individual cautioned that there should be some cost sharing. “You don’t get something for nothing”.
 - another suggested income generating properties should bear a greater burden of costs
 - another advised that the burden should be light on property owners, because of low property values, otherwise their costs could exceed the value of their property.

2. Hilltop Urban Church Focus Group

Highlights

- Ten (10) church members participated in the focus group interview.
- Hilltop Urban Church is located in the neighborhood and is a ministry of the First Evangelical Free Church located in northeast Wichita.
- Church ministry includes a free meal served weekly at church for anyone in the neighborhood.
- Participants identified immediate access to variety of services as a major advantage of Hilltop.
- Private alleys and off-street houses contribute to a host of problems, including threats to public health and safety, parking, poor drainage and mail delivery.
- Participants found total consensus in rejecting modest, incremental change and advocating for major changes in Hilltop (similar to Option C).

- Low property values and lack of investment incentives loom as big impediments to change.
- All but one participant believes the City must pay for 80 percent or more of improvement costs, citing the small number of properties in Hilltop and modest incomes of residents.

Strengths of West Hilltop

- Many services, including retail, medical, schools and public transportation, are easily accessible within walking distance.
- Public and nonprofit facilities including community building, park, community garden and church are an asset.
- Housing is affordable for people with low incomes
- Hilltop has a positive sense of community, with many face-to-face relationships.
- There is access to good preschool, elementary and secondary education
- Housing stock is solid.
- Decline in crime incidents has increased sense of personal safety.

Concerns About West Hilltop Physical Conditions

In order of priority, short-term concerns are: 1) condition and inaccessibility of private alleys that threaten public safety and create drainage problems; 2) poor City services including police patrol, and poor housing and health code enforcement; 3) deteriorating condition of water and sewer lines; 4) traffic safety - speeding cars in neighborhood.

In order of priority, long-term concerns are: 1) lack of public access for homes that are set back from streets²; 2) high density housing; and 3) downward pressure on market values caused by the neglect or abandonment of rental properties and lack of incentives to invest in improvements.

General Change Desired

Individual aspirations for change included:

- more stable residency – reduced transience
- stricter enforcement of housing and environmental codes
- improvements in the physical appearance of neighborhood (private and public properties)
- a cooperative spirit among residents and other neighborhood stakeholders
- a zoning overlay may be needed to solve some physical problems
- elimination of drug-related crime
- solutions to parking problems, including removal of abandoned cars, restrictions of parking to one side of streets and more off-street parking on Bluffview.

Level of Change Desired

Participants were in full agreement that major change (Option C) in West Hilltop was necessary and offered the following comments as explanation:

² A host of problems caused by the private alleys including inability of public safety and mail carrier personnel to locate addresses, parking problems, poor lighting, havens for crime.

- an “Option B” approach has been tried in the past and doesn’t seem to be addressing the core problems. Band-aid solutions won’t work in the long run. Major change is needed. Continuing to “patch” problems will ultimately cost more.
- outside partnerships will be needed – there is not sufficient leadership or resources inside the neighborhood to make major change happen. Government can’t do it all, but it must take the lead and form partnerships with private groups.
- a modest approach will not solve all the problems created by private alleys.
- there are significant economic barriers to major change. What will be the incentives for private investment?
- major change must carefully be implemented so residents are not displaced.
- responses recording desire for change ranged from “6 - 10” with one-half of participants selecting a measure of “9” or “10”.

Paying for Change

- All but one participant believed the City should pay for 80 percent or more of improvement costs:
 - there is no way that the small number of units in Hilltop can afford the cost, especially since many residents have below average incomes.
 - The City needs to reduce spending on new infrastructure at edges of City and reinvest in neighborhoods in the City’s core
- one participant believes the City should pay for one-half the cost, explaining the plan must be realistic and could include use of tools such as tax abatements.

3. East Hilltop Manor Focus Group

Highlights

- Nine (9) Manor residents participated in the focus group interview.
- The “Manor” is the term applied to the 400 housing units in east Hilltop that have been cooperatively owned by a residents’ association for over 50 years.
- As current or former board members of Manor Corporation, all participants have record of leadership in the neighborhood.
- Participants are long-time residents of the Manor, with several “second generation” residents.
- Participants communicated considerable pride in Hilltop history, affordability and condition of housing, and in the neighborhood’s “small town” spirit.
- Participants expressed concern that needs and interests of the Manor be included in any revitalization plans for West Hilltop.
- Significant consensus was found with respect to concerns and aspirations for the neighborhood and on the question of who pays for improvements.
- Participants generally favored a more modest set of improvements (Option B) and believe the City must pay for most of the costs due to low and fixed incomes of residents.

Strengths of West Hilltop

- Generally housing stock in good condition -- de-mountable housing intended to be temporary has held up remarkably well.
- Although modest, some housing improvements are occurring:
 - Newer Asian-American homeowners are improving their properties
 - New housing construction by Mennonite Housing occurred in 2003
- Support from City government and several faith-based organizations is present.
- Efforts by several organizations to organize and empower residents (HAND and Hilltop Alliance) have been undertaken.

Concerns About West Hilltop Physical Conditions

In order of priority, short-term concerns are: 1) sub-standard housing; 2) unattended trash (some is disposed in Manor dumpsters; 3) illegal parking in yards; and 4) standing water.

In order of priority, long-term concerns are: 1) poor condition of streets (e.g. patching over gas line repairs under streets instead of resurfacing); 2) traffic safety – cars travel too fast through neighborhood; and 3) poor condition of water and sewer lines.

General Change Desired

Individual aspirations for change included:

- eliminate all drug houses
- condemn and demolish all abandoned, dilapidated houses
- eliminate all inaccessible housing (those configured around private alleys)
- rid neighborhood of stray dogs that threaten pedestrian safety.

Level of Change Desired

Participants were in agreement that modest change (Option B) in West Hilltop was preferred with the following qualifications:

- new housing construction should only be allowed on vacant lots (that is, no existing housing in repairable condition should be demolished)
- housing should be kept affordable for persons with modest means (participants could not find agreement as to a dollar value for “affordable”)
- incentives for increasing homeownership should be the highest priority, e.g., providing low-interest loans for first-time buyers
- sidewalks are not a priority (several felt they were not necessary)
- replacement of aging water and sewer lines is essential.

One additional proposed qualification to Option B was assuring that housing improvements should be required to conform to historic character of Hilltop, but there was not agreement on this point.

Paying for Change

- Participants found it difficult to talk about the desire for change as separate from the question of who pays for change.
- Strong agreement was determined that low and fixed income residents who predominate in Hilltop cannot afford higher taxes, special assessments or higher rents passed on by landlords.
- Participants found unanimous consensus that sources of financing other than Hilltop property owners would be needed to pay for vast majority of improvements.

4. Hilltop Landlord Focus Group

Highlights

- Three (3) landlords participated in the focus group interview (22 invited).
- Only one of the three participants owned multi-properties, and he owned 19 properties.
- Hilltop's strengths were identified as housing affordability, close proximity to services and diversity of residents
- Landlords' concerns included low and stagnant property values that discourage investment in property, vacant, abandoned housing and surface water ponding that results from poor infrastructure design.
- A majority favored modest improvements (Option B) with the inclusion of water and sewer line replacements. However, the multiple property owner also said he might support major change if he were able to partner with the City in planning and implementing such an initiative.
- All believed the City's approach to code enforcement is rigid and adversarial, and advocate a more respectful partnership with landlords in the future.
- Due to low property values, they believe the City must pay for majority of improvements.

Strengths of West Hilltop

- Affordable housing for those with low incomes and poor credit histories
- Accessibility to a variety of private and public services
- Racial/ethnic diversity of neighborhood

Concerns About West Hilltop Physical Conditions

- Ability to recoup property investments if improvements are required
- Lack of available financing for people who do want to purchase their own home
- Vacant, abandoned housing
- Poor drainage on house lots and in private alleys

General Change Desired

Individual aspirations for change included:

- regradation and maintenance of private alleys to achieve proper drainage
- new streets to improve access and reduce density (similar to plan in the 2000 Hilltop Neighborhood Revitalization Plan).

Level of Change Desired

Participants were in agreement that modest change (Option B) in West Hilltop was preferred with the following qualifications:

- Two (2) participants favored modest change (Option B), but without the present aggressive, adversarial style of housing code enforcement:
 - housing codes are unrealistic for the unique characteristics of Hilltop housing
 - current code enforcement is inconsistent and interpretation differs with each inspector
 - inspectors too oriented to their checklist rather than finding reasonable solutions
 - solutions would be more forthcoming if inspectors would treat property owners as partners rather than adversaries³
 - would like to see condemnation process accelerated for vacant, abandoned properties
 - also want to find a way to increase home ownership opportunities – “Isn’t there a way to get financing for a \$15,000 mortgage?”
- All agreed replacement of water and sewer lines is needed
- One (1) participant favored major change (Option C) explaining:
 - Plans for major change would force landlords to fix up properties or sell them.

Paying for Change

- Full consensus that the City should pay for 70 percent or more of improvements:
 - Two (2) participants believe the City should pay for 90 percent of cost
 - Neither landlords nor homeowners can afford substantial special assessments.
 - Investments by property owners (in paying for major change) would exceed the value of the property.

³ One participant referenced the spirit of teamwork he used to experience with Section 8 inspectors who presented an attitude of respect with responsible landlords who wanted to do the right thing. “Not all of us are slum landlords.”

5. Homeowner Focus Group

Highlights

- Only one (1) person attended, making focus group dynamic and reliability impossible to achieve (22 invitations to homeowners were extended).
- Homeowners comprise approximately 10 percent of property owners.
- Participant's comments included:
 - Proximity of services for people without a car is a major Hilltop advantage.
 - has appreciated interest of the City in wanting to make improvements
 - constructive activities provided by Hilltop Urban Church are major contribution to Hilltop
 - a significant concern is substandard housing and lack of tenant screening which contributes to it
 - re-platting neighborhood is key solution to solving many problems
 - preferred a major approach to improvements (Option C) and all of the elements included in it. Believes more modest change will not solve the neighborhood's problems. A patchwork approach will eventually require houses to be torn down.
 - she is a "10" on the scale of change and believes wholesale change is essential
 - observed that the City will need to pay for all the cost of improvements, as residents are on fixed incomes or are low income. "You cannot impose a tax increase on the owner of a \$25,000 home."

6. Parents of School-Age Children Focus Group

Highlights

- One in four Hilltop residents is under age 18, so these families are significant stakeholders and for the most part, the group is surmised to be largely renters.
- Only one (1) parent attended, making focus group dynamics and reliability impossible to achieve.
- Focus group invitations extended indirectly to approximately 61 families whose children attend Jefferson Elementary (representing 83 children) and additional families whose children attend the neighborhood Head Start program.
- Due to dictates of confidentiality, schools were unable to provide names of families directly, but were extraordinarily helpful in sending invitations home with students.
- Project facilitators donated pizza and beverages as an additional incentive to attend.
- Participant's comments included:
 - satisfied with rental property – it's all she can afford
 - generally satisfied with the neighborhood, especially the close location of shopping and bus lines (does not have car)
 - concerned that children and grandchildren in her care must walk to Jefferson School, especially in the winter time

- preferred major improvements (Option C) and responded with a “10” in terms of desired level of change
- believed the City must pay for full cost of improvements, as tax increases would be passed on by landlords to their tenants in the form of increased rents.

7. Youth Focus Group

The youth pastor at Hilltop Urban Church volunteered a youth group of older teenagers at the church for a focus group and provided names and contact information. Letters of invitation from Council Member Skelton were sent to these individuals, and the pastor indicated they their planned to attend. Several hours before the focus group was scheduled, facilitators were informed that the participants chose instead to attend a music concert of one of their peers. As this was the final focus group scheduled, no attempt was made to reschedule it.

8. Renter Focus Group

Efforts to obtain the names and contact information for Hilltop renters were not successful. Such information is not public record, and the individuals and agencies who volunteered during the initial project interviews to provide this information did not do so. This large stakeholder group, making up some 90 percent of Hilltop households and comprised largely of people at or near the poverty level, is regrettably unrepresented in the focus group interviews.

NOTE:

Some clues to their needs and preferences for change from this stakeholder group may be taken from the door-to-door police survey conducted in April, 2006, and completed by 268 West Hilltop households:

When asked for their top five concerns, the most frequently mentioned were:

- crime, especially drug related and also including theft, vandalism and gang activity
- trash
- unsupervised children
- noise
- traffic problems
- stray animals
- abandoned houses.

When asked what one improvement they would like to see in Hilltop, the most frequent responses by participants were:

- an end to illegal drug activity
- expanded police presence
- removal of trash
- additional lighting
- improvements to housing.

IV. Hilltop Neighborhood-Wide Meeting

All residents of West Hilltop were invited by City Council Member Skelton to attend a neighborhood-wide meeting the evening of March 15, 2007, at nearby Via Christi Hospital (St. Joseph campus). Ten days in advance of the meeting, community police officers hand-delivered invitations to each Hilltop household. Nearly 40 people attended the meeting, most of whom were West Hilltop residents; several residents from East Hilltop and at least one landlord were also in attendance.

The purpose of the meeting was to:

- describe the Hilltop Facilitation Project
- share findings of individual stakeholder interviews and focus groups
- invite additional observations and feedback about the project findings
- determine next steps for the City of Wichita and Hilltop stakeholders.

Council Member Skelton convened the meeting and delegated facilitation of the agenda to the project facilitator (see Appendix C for meeting agenda).

The facilitator reported project findings, and invited reaction and questions for clarification. The following feedback was offered:

- In the development of revitalization plans, the City must ensure complete transparency.
- The needs of residents should have priority over other stakeholders who do not reside in Hilltop.
- The addition of sidewalks is great, but the City should know that quality of the construction has been mixed, e.g., the sidewalks on sections of Menlo Street.
- Grants or other cash incentives are essential for increasing home ownership.
- While condemnation of deteriorating properties is a welcome action, doing so often creates another “eye sore” that gathers tall weeds, trash and bulky waste.
- Finding affordable home repair services is a major barrier to home improvements.
- Given the lower incomes of residents, some type of grant program is needed to help residents afford home improvements.
- While increasing the lumens in existing lighting was helpful, there are still too many dark spots, and new lighting locations should be a priority.
- In replacing water lines, the City should not place water meters at the street level, as it will result in increased cost for residents.
- Residents don’t just want “handouts”; rather, they should be expected to contribute time and energy to improving the neighborhood.
- Residents are afraid to call the police about suspect activity in the neighborhood, fearing retaliation.

The following questions were raised:

- Who has responsibility for moving revitalization plans to the next step? *“We’ve been here before with the 2000 Hilltop Neighborhood Revitalization Plan.”*
- What can be done about the terrible condition of the alleys, especially since they are a public safety hazard?

- How will water line replacement impact water pressure?
- Will replatting of property occur?
- How can we improve communication about what's going on in Hilltop and the City's future plans?
- Does the City intend to demolish Hilltop properties?

The facilitator asked for reaction to two findings from individual stakeholder interviews that were reported as:

9. Every person interviewed expressed a desire to personally contribute time and energy toward making the neighborhood a better place to live for all residents.

10. Nearly all persons interviewed expressed frustration over the factions in Hilltop and the intensity of interpersonal conflicts among residents.

Many believed that making improvements in Hilltop's quality of life will be stymied until neighborhood leaders either resolve their differences or allow new leadership to emerge in their place.

Reactions to 9 above included:

- The finding represents an enormous asset for the Hilltop neighborhood.
- Neighborhood clean-ups are a great example of how we can work together.
- *“When we worked together to create the park [Friendship Park] we were so united, and I felt a great sense of satisfaction.”*

Attendees were reluctant to address 10 above, and the facilitator had to continue to press for reaction. Many appeared uncomfortable with the subject, but some offered the following comments:

- People stopped coming to meetings, and that will not allow Hilltop to solve its challenges.
- *“I dropped out of participating [in the neighborhood] due to the conflict.”*
- There is a low level of trust among many neighbors.
- *We have to stop fighting with each other.*
- Yes – the conflict is a problem and has discouraged neighborhood participation in the past few years.
- Residents have to take steps to get past their differences; otherwise it will be hard to achieve improvements in the neighborhood.

Residents were unanimous in agreeing that improvements in the neighborhood were needed and that they want to move forward with plans for neighborhood revitalization. In response to the question of what next steps they wished to take as a neighborhood, the following suggestions were offered. Hilltop neighbors should:

1. host a social activity for residents to rebuild and/or enhance relationships
2. ask the City to continue in the short term to provide an outside facilitator to help residents rebuild trust and seek agreement on desired improvements. Residents need time and a safe space for rebuilding trust

3. ask residents to support a “Hilltop covenant” to describe behavioral expectations for how people engage in positive, respectful relationships with neighbors and other partners. *“We need to present a unified image to the City and other prospective partners.”*
4. engage in a brainstorming session with interested landlords to explore partnership opportunities
5. conduct a door-to-door survey to gather improvement ideas and recruit volunteers
6. investigate private grants as a source for revitalization projects.

The facilitator specifically asked for feedback on 2 and 3 above, and a sizeable majority was supportive.

Council Member Skelton closed the meeting expressing a desire to move forward and indicating he would consider convening a revitalization committee in the future. He indicated that immediate next steps would include delivering a final report from the project facilitator, and subsequently reviewing recommendations from City staff.

VI. Project Findings and Recommendations

Findings

1. Hilltop is strongly valued as a community by many of its residents, especially homeowners, a majority of whom have lived in the neighborhood for many years.

While owner-occupied homes constitute only about ten percent of total households, in recent years this group has provided much of the leadership for neighborhood networking and improvements.

2. Many Hilltop residents, especially those who rent their homes, face difficult challenges as the result of substandard, unsafe or abandoned housing; inadequate infrastructure; poverty; hunger; higher incidents of crime; resident transience; and in some cases, unresponsive landlords.

Many of these challenges have been documented in the 2000 Hilltop Neighborhood Revitalization Plan. Many are also common to lower-income neighborhoods in general. However, Hilltop's unique origins exacerbate its housing problems. The fact that residents who are renters generally did not participate in this project should not be interpreted as an absence of interest in neighborhood improvements; more likely it is a reflection of the pressing immediacy of their basic needs.

3. The Hilltop neighborhood, while facing serious limitations of economic resources, is rich in social assets for addressing the needs of many of its residents.

Nearly every person interviewed in Phase 1 of this project, as well as many people participating in focus groups and the neighborhood-wide meeting, expressed a strong desire to contribute time and energy for neighborhood revitalization. A Hilltop survey conducted by the Wichita Police Department in April, 2006, also affirms the finding.

Stakeholders also communicated appreciation and respect for the strong presence of community police officers in Hilltop. Also, three faith-based organizations are active in addressing some of residents' physical and economic needs: 1) Hilltop Urban Church, a ministry of the First Evangelical Free Church; 2) Dear Neighbor Ministries, an outreach of the Sisters of St. Joseph; and 3) Believer's Tabernacle Church. Additionally the Head Start program based in the neighborhood and the nearby Jefferson Elementary School address many of the learning needs of children and provide support for their parents. Moreover, the close proximity of retail establishments and City bus lines are significant assets for those who live in Hilltop.

4. Unfavorable economic conditions among individual stakeholders serve as barriers for change for many property owners and others who would like to own their own homes.

Although landlord participation was low, their message was that low property values and adjacent housing conditions strongly discourage them from making major improvements to their properties. Similarly, many homeowners say they cannot afford major repairs without financial incentives and assistance. East Hilltop Manor residents believe expanding homeownership is a key to revitalization of West Hilltop, but that it is hard for lower income people to obtain financing from lending institutions.

5. Until recently, Hilltop residents had a successful history of working with their neighbors and community partners for neighborhood improvement, and can point with justifiable pride to many neighborhood enhancements.

In the past, residents volunteered their time to work with neighborhood youth; carried a petition to successfully advocate for sidewalk improvements; worked for creation of the community center; contributed “sweat equity” to construct Friendship Park; attracted a Mennonite Housing project and organized themselves into action committees for implementing elements of the 2000 Hilltop Neighborhood Revitalization Plan. The neighborhood association continues to organize volunteer clean-up projects for removal of trash and other debris.

6. The vast majority of stakeholders participating in the Hilltop Facilitation Project are not satisfied with the status quo and desire improvements in the neighborhood. However, stakeholders have significant differences over the nature and degree of desired change which have served to inhibit progress. Without a higher degree of stakeholder consensus, the City will find it difficult to move forward with the more sweeping changes as proposed in the 2000 plan for the neighborhood.

In the category of more incremental change, all or nearly all stakeholders want:

- replacement of water and sewer lines
- either rehabilitation or rapid condemnation of abandoned houses
- additional lighting
- incentives for more home ownership
- continued affordable housing costs
- a neighborhood free of trash
- a permanent resolution of problems generated by narrow private alleys
- safer and more attractive housing through stronger code enforcement (nearly all desired this change with the exception of landlords).

Many stakeholder differences fall along the lines of the two most active neighborhood groups: HAND, the neighborhood association, and persons aligned with the Hilltop Urban Church.⁴ In general, HAND members prefer most modest, incremental change, and church members favor more comprehensive change, albeit on a block-by-block basis, believing that more modest changes will not solve Hilltop’s major problems. Some HAND members expressed anxiety that major change would result in wholesale destruction of housing and displacement of residents. If given assurance that this would not occur, it is possible more HAND stakeholders would consider broader improvements.

7. Stakeholders are appreciative of the City’s interest in their neighborhood as symbolized by the 2000 Hilltop Neighborhood Revitalization Plan, and continue to look to the City Council and Council Member Skelton for leadership to bring about neighborhood improvements.

Some express frustration that revitalization planning stalled several years ago but also understand that the neighborhood must accept some of the responsibility for the problem. Many communicate respect for Council Member Skelton’s leadership in obtaining

⁴ A separate nonprofit agency, the Hilltop Improvement Alliance, was also loosely affiliated with the church, but at the present time is inactive.

funding for sidewalk improvements and hope he will continue to work with them on future improvements. The presence of the community police officers is also widely respected and valued.

8. Most stakeholders acknowledge that progress in developing a vision and goals for neighborhood revitalization has been thwarted by serious interpersonal conflicts and rivalries among neighborhood leaders and volunteers.

Nearly all persons participating in individual interviews expressed disillusionment with the polarization of neighborhood leaders and volunteers that appears to have emerged in 2003. Stakeholders were reluctant to discuss the interpersonal conflicts in group settings, but when asked at the neighborhood-wide meeting, some acknowledged the problem. While the conflict “fault line” generally appears to be between the neighborhood association and persons associated with two of the faith-based organizations, other divisions among residents also exist.

The conflict is intensely felt, appears more personal than ideological and creates dysfunctional relationships. Some report withdrawing from neighborhood volunteerism out of fear that if they disagree with others, they will be reported to the City for a code violation. Many stakeholders privately expressed the belief that progress in improving the neighborhood’s quality of life will be stymied until neighborhood leaders either resolve their differences or step aside and allow new leadership to emerge.

Project Recommendations

The recommendations below are intended to describe immediate next steps for neighborhood revitalization. All but the first recommendation should be undertaken only after receiving clear evidence that stakeholders have taken steps to improve relationships, unify leadership and identify a common purpose that transcends their differences.

1. Recruit a volunteer, third-party facilitator who will continue to meet with stakeholders from all factions to establish protocols for constructive interaction and to seek common interests in neighborhood revitalization.

This idea was proposed by a resident who is also a leader in one of the neighborhood’s faith-based organizations, and it received considerable support at the neighborhood-wide meeting. The suggestion was predicated on his premise that stakeholders need help reestablishing trust and focusing on what unites rather than divides them. With such deep divisions, residents need a *safe space* created by a neutral facilitator to raise and resolve sensitive issues and discover common ground. The facilitator should invite allegiance to a neighborhood covenant, that is, a list of positive behaviors that neighbors pledge to use when working with each other.

A third party could assist in focusing on common interests rather than differing positions and past rivalries. One or two meetings should be sufficient to discover whether this goal is possible. The City may be able to find a skilled volunteer to act as facilitator.

2. Under the leadership of Council Member Skelton, create a Hilltop Revitalization Committee with a mission to consult with stakeholders and work with the City of Wichita to craft the general parameters of a neighborhood revitalization plan.

Based upon participation in the meetings envisioned in recommendation #1 above, Council Member Skelton should take the opportunity to bring new voices to this leadership task. For the Committee to be effective, members will need assurance that the City's future actions will not result in wholesale destruction of houses and displacement of Hilltop residents.

3. Seek avenues to enable Hilltop stakeholders to remain informed of developments and opportunities to participate in planning for neighborhood revitalization.

Accurate and timely information is a key to rebuilding community relationships. Given the high percentage of home renters and the high rate of their turnover, along with the challenges of mail delivery to some homes, communication with stakeholders is an extraordinary challenge and will require creative strategies. The meetings envisioned in recommendation #1 should be used to generate ideas and cooperation for doing so. At minimum communication avenues should include: 1) the *Hilltop Neighborhood News* and the HAND newsletter; 2) Hilltop Urban Church; 3) community police officers, including their occasional use of door-to-door information delivery; and 4) U.S. Mail deliveries to homeowners, landlords and the East Hilltop Manor Board of Directors. While the City has an affirmative obligation to keep stakeholders informed, communication responsibilities must be widely shared with neighborhood leaders and groups.

VI. APPENDIX

Appendix A

Stakeholder Interviews and Project Design

In December, 2006 and January, 2007, eighteen individual, face-to-face interviews were conducted with a variety of Hilltop stakeholders and resulted in the following recommendations (See Appendix B for list of those interviewed):

1. A decentralized, face-to-face communication process using small focus group interviews is essential to maximize participation in the project.

Face to face communication is nearly always the superior communication channel for enhancing the quality of feedback, and this concept is reflected in the City's general parameters for the Hilltop project. The stakeholder interviews served to underscore the need for a decentralized approach to the project, as they revealed multiple and cross cutting interpersonal conflicts between and among some Hilltop residents, their neighborhood leaders and leaders of some of the faith-based organizations that serve the neighborhood.

During the course of interviews, more than one person advised: if "person x" is in attendance, others will stay away; or if "person y" is present, others will be afraid to offer candid advice. Knowledge of the interpersonal conflicts in the neighborhood gained through the interview process will be valuable in the formation of focus groups.

2. Eight focus groups, generally comprised of 10-15 persons each, should be convened in February, 2007, and organized around the following stakeholder groups:

- 1) members of the Hilltop Association for Neighborhood Development (HAND)
- 2) other residents who are homeowners
- 3) other resident who are renters
- 4) residents who are members of the Hilltop Urban Church
- 5) residents who are family members with children
- 6) residents who are teenagers served by one of the neighborhood's faith-based agencies
- 7) members of the Hilltop Manor Corporation (East Hilltop)
- 8) landlords of property in the neighborhood

3. All focus groups, with the exception of the Manor Corporation and youth groups, should be located at the Hilltop neighborhood.

The Hilltop Center has sufficient space to comfortably locate a small focus group if the Park Department can provide access and setup of the needed tables and chairs. The focus group with the Manor Corporation can be held in the Manor's board room, and the youth focus group should be held at the Believers Tabernacle Church. The interview with church members can be at their church; and the group comprised of parents will need to be at the church because the Center does not have additional usable space for child care.

4. All focus groups should be scheduled during evening hours in order to maximize convenience to participants.

The focus groups to be held at the Community Center and possibly Hilltop Urban Church during evening hours will require police security.

5. Participation in all focus groups should be at the invitation of Council Member Skelton and by invitation only. Moreover, no resident should be in attendance at more than one focus group.

Participation should be allowed only by invitation only so as to maximize the goal of balanced representation in the process and also to prevent the neighborhood's interpersonal conflict from deterring the feedback of focus group participants. However, a general invitation to participate in the process should be conveyed in all general communication about the project along with a phone number if residents are wish to be included in a focus group. At minimum, focus group letters of invitation should be mailed and/or distributed at least two weeks in advance of the scheduled focus group.

6. Specific supports, hospitality and incentives as described below are necessary to increase participation in focus groups:

- daycare for the focus groups targeting parents and renters
- transportation (invited participants must specifically request this service)
- translation (invited participants must specifically request this service)
- beverage refreshments

7. Focus groups should be tightly scheduled and structured so as not to exceed a total of 90 minutes and should have the following components:

- introductions and purpose of the project
- presentation of a current profile of the Hilltop neighborhood, including demographics, condition of public facilities, description of city services, enumeration of recent public improvements, brief highlights of 2000 Neighborhood Revitalization Plan
- structured participant feedback about desired public improvements
- determination of priority preferences with respect to public improvements.

8. Furnish the following equipment and supplies for enhancing the effectiveness of the focus group interviews:

- screen
- data projector
- copies of handout materials
- poster-size map of west Hilltop
- name tents
- large easel and post-it-note flip chart paper
- tables and chairs in "seminar" arrangement (U-shaped table arrangement) for up to 20
- small table for projector and laptop
- extension cord and power strip.

9. A neighborhood-wide meeting open to attendance by all stakeholders should be scheduled after completion of all focus group interviews to report focus group results, and determine the level and extent of neighborhood consensus regarding public improvements.

The meeting date should be scheduled well in advance to allow the widest possible promotion among stakeholders. Location of the meeting will need to be determined.

10. Additional neighborhood-wide communication from Council Member Skelton about the progress of the project should continue through HAND, the *Hilltop Neighborhood News*, faith-based groups and community police officers.

So as to protect the project's image of neutrality, door-to-door distribution of additional information about the project should be done by community police officers if possible.

11. A letter of appreciation from Council Member Skelton, along with a summary of the facilitator's final report, should be sent to each focus group participant.

Additional Observations from Stakeholder Interviews

Every person interviewed for this project expressed:

- a desire to personally contribute time and energy toward making the neighborhood a better place to live for all residents
- willingness to help make the City's current facilitation process successful; many volunteered to furnish names and contact information for focus group participants.

Nearly all persons interviewed for this project expressed:

- significant frustration at the serious and dysfunctional interpersonal conflict between and among certain individuals and/or groups in the neighborhood
- belief that progress in improving the neighborhood's quality of life will be stymied until neighborhood leaders either resolve their differences or step aside and allow new leadership to emerge.

Appendix B

Hilltop Stakeholder Interviews Completed

Bill Gress, Director
Dear Neighbor Ministries
Interviewed 12/15/06

Marlene Turner, Volunteer Coordinator
Dear Neighbor Ministries
Interviewed 12/15/06

Alfreda Arnold
Dear Neighbor Ministries
Interviewed 12/15/06

Matt Foley, President
HAND Neighborhood Association
Interviewed 12/18/06

Gay Quisenberry
Volunteer/Publisher, Hilltop Neighborhood News
Hilltop Improvement Alliance
Interviewed 12/18/06

Billie Tucker, resident and neighborhood volunteer
Interviewed 12/27/06

John Andrade, board member
HAND neighborhood association
Interviewed 12/29/06

Dennis Hesselbarth, Pastor
Hilltop Urban Church
Interviewed 1/4/07

Heath Kintzel, Youth Pastor
Hilltop Urban Church
Interviewed 1/4/07

Sharon Askew, former president and former board member
HAND Neighborhood Association
Hilltop Improvement Alliance
Interviewed 1/4/07

Sister Ann Catherine Berger
Sisters of St. Joseph
Interviewed 1/4/07

Scott Dryden, Executive Director
The Dream Center (based at Believers Tabernacle church and provides faith-based social services to Hilltop)
Interviewed 1/4/07

Kathy Cutsinger, former president and current board member
HAND neighborhood association
Interviewed 1/5/07

Burma Hanschu, current board member
HAND neighborhood association
Interviewed 1/5/07

Pat White, volunteer at Hilltop Urban Church and neighborhood homeowner
Interviewed 1/5/07

Pat Smith, social worker
Jefferson Elementary School
Interviewed 1/10/07

Joseph McConnell, President
Hilltop Manor Mutual Housing Corporation
Interviewed 1/11/07

Vicki Berberick, Director
Wichita Headstart (located in Hilltop Community Center)
Interviewed 1/17/07

Appendix C



Hilltop Neighborhood Meeting

March 15, 2007

7:00 - 8:30 p.m.

Via Christi Cafeteria - St Joseph Campus
Convened by Council Member Jim Skelton

Purpose of the Meeting

- Describe the purpose of the Hilltop Facilitation project
- Learn the findings of the stakeholder interviews and focus groups
- Contribute additional observations and feedback as desired
- Determine next steps for the City of Wichita and stakeholders

7:00 **Welcome and opening comments**

Council Member Jim Skelton

7:10 **Purpose of the meeting and participation guidelines**

Marla Flentje, project facilitator

7:15 **Participant introductions**

1. Please provide your name and address.
2. What would you like to see as an outcome of this meeting?

7:25 Review of findings of Hilltop Facilitation project

Marla Flentje

7:40 Response to project findings *

1. What questions of understanding do you have?
2. What is your reaction to what you heard?

8:00 Next steps for Hilltop stakeholders *

1. What if anything should Hilltop residents and other stakeholders do to pursue improvements in Hilltop?
2. What is the extent of agreement on what the next steps should be?

8:25 Next steps for the City of Wichita

Council Member Skelton

8:30 Adjourn

* Discussion facilitated by Marla Flentje