

Community Revitalization in New Cassel, New York

Executive Summary

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Research conducted for:



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by The National Center for
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I am responsible for the findings, conclusions, and recommendations contained in this study.

—Mary Ann Allison, Ph.D.
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Executive Summary

This study documents the history, successes, key factors, and lessons learned during the continuing New Cassel community revitalization, focusing on the decade 1998 to 2008.

Sustainable Long Island—a nonprofit organization dedicated to economic growth, environmental health, and equal opportunity on Long Island—acted as a catalyst and facilitator in support of this renewal process. Sustainable Long Island sponsored this research to encourage celebrations of the many revitalization accomplishments and to provide a case study with an emphasis on the institutions, partnerships, and processes that helped make them possible.

Background

Historically a predominantly African American community, New Cassel became home to an increasing number of Latino and Haitian residents in the later half of the 20th century. By the 2000 U.S. Census, 47% of the community's roughly 13,000 residents identified themselves as Black/African American; 32% as white; and the remaining 21% self-identified as other races or mixed race. New Cassel had the highest concentration (41%) of Latino/Hispanic population (Hispanic is the term used by the Census) of any community in Nassau County.

At the turn of the 21st century, New Cassel suffered from a lack of affordable housing, no downtown center, environmental contamination, overcrowded and illegal housing, and community despair and discord. Residents, government officials, and nonprofit leaders cite a number of complex factors that may have interacted to precipitate a need for revitalization, including:

- the Town of North Hempstead's conscious or unconscious designation of New Cassel as a marginal area which it, therefore, neglected during much of the 20th century;
- the effects of race, gender, and class segregation and discrimination in housing, education, employment, and access to resources; and
- the lack of a regional development plan that adequately responded to the changing and diverse needs of all Long Islanders.

Catalysts for Change in New Cassel

At the beginning of the revitalization process, Rev. Patrick Duggan, then Executive Director of Sustainable Long Island, and Bishop (then Rev.) Lionel Harvey of the First Baptist Church of Westbury, helped create the conditions under which discouraged and divided community residents could come together and form an organization—the Unified New Cassel Revitalization Corporation (UNCCRC)—with an agenda that represented all stakeholders in New Cassel. (Rev. Harvey would become Chairman of UNCCRC.) Using a “Go slow at first, in order to go faster later” technique, Sustainable Long Island and UNCCRC invested in extensive community and government outreach and education, conducting more than 500 large and small meetings with

community residents in homes, schools, churches, businesses, and public buildings. These meetings covered many topics, including revitalization of suburban centers, affordable housing, and the effects of environmental damage. They were a means of listening to residents' hopes and concerns as well as educating people about how vigorous participation in planning and governance could benefit the entire community.

In May 2000, four groups—UNCCRC, the Town of North Hempstead, the Town Community Development Agency (CDA), and Sustainable Long Island—signed a Memorandum of Understanding that formalized their partnership and provided a legally-binding community voice in the revitalization process. With Sustainable Long Island as a non-voting facilitator, a ten-member New Cassel Community Steering Committee was formed to identify and meet community needs.

In July 2002, Sustainable Long Island and UNCCRC hired Dan Burden, a nationally recognized authority on pedestrian-friendly planning and design, and a team of urban planners to facilitate a weekend community Visioning Charrette. Approximately 800 residents, business owners, clergy, nonprofit leaders, and government officials joined in the Vision tours of the community and planning sessions, with most residents participating for at least two full days. Translators were provided for those less comfortable speaking English. The resulting New Cassel Vision Plan included renderings, proposed zoning changes, and a Vision Implementation Matrix that listed 14 Action Items with planned activities designated with short-, medium-, and long-term steps.

Political will and effective government partnerships have been essential to revitalization success. Not all visioning activities result in a documented plan and even those that do are often not formally adopted by the relevant government jurisdictions. By adopting the Vision Plan in March 2003, the Town of North Hempstead established an important precedent. Going further, in July 2003, the Town expanded the New Cassel Urban Renewal Plan to include the Vision Plan and, in September 2003, revised the relevant zoning codes, thereby accomplishing one of the most critical recommendations from the community (Action Item 10).

Political support for the revitalization process actually began well before the Visioning Charrette took place. While Revs. Duggan and Harvey were initially engaging residents, then Town of North Hempstead Supervisor May Newburger publicly acknowledged that the Town had ignored New Cassel and committed to help the community, beginning a lobbying effort to provide funds for revitalization. This lobbying—along with the active support of the Nassau County Office of Economic Development and the Office of Housing and Intergovernmental Affairs—has borne fruit in grants from, among others, the HUD Community Development Block Grant Program, the HUD HOME Investment Partnerships Program, the federal EPA and New York State Brownfields and Superfund Revitalization Programs, and federal and state transportation agencies. More than \$80 million in public and private funding has been raised to support the revitalization efforts.

With Rev. Duggan's move to head the Nassau County Office of Economic Development in 2004, the Town-County government partnership working on behalf of New Cassel was strengthened. At the federal level, this partnership was supported by U.S. Senator Hillary Clinton and U.S. Representative Carolyn McCarthy. When Jon Kaiman succeeded May Newburger as Town Supervisor, he continued, as he had been doing in prior positions, working for the community. For example, as Neptune Regional Transmission System (RTS) was locating in New

Cassel, Supervisor Kaiman orchestrated negotiations that resulted in a \$10 million contribution from Neptune RTS that will support the design and construction of a Community Multi-Use center (Action Item 14).

The Vision Plan has informed all of the subsequent development planning processes, as well as provided ample evidence of community participation that is often required to obtain federal and state funding. With the goal of increasing transparency in government process and continuing to build trust with the community, the Town CDA sessions in which real estate developers presented their proposals for the urban renewal sites were open to the public.

Financial infrastructure has also been critical to the revitalization process. Access to local banking and credit services helps residents to obtain mortgages, finance college educations, and conduct their financial affairs with greater ease. Banking services also support local business development. Both are critical to community health. In March 2008, County Executive Thomas Suozzi announced that the New York State Banking Department had designated New Cassel and its financial partner, City National Bank of New Jersey, as the first Banking Development District (BDD) in Nassau County. City National will open New Cassel's only branch bank at one of the redevelopment sites.

Also as of 2008, four New Cassel businesses have been certified by the Nassau County Office of Economic Development and New York State in the state Empire Zone program. This program was created to stimulate economic growth through state tax incentives designed to attract new businesses and to enable existing businesses to expand and create jobs. Together these businesses created 68 new jobs in 2007, with Cardoza Plumbing creating almost all of the new work opportunities (65 of the 68). Over the next five years, these certified businesses are projected to create 119 new jobs.

In addition to its activities in the areas of community outreach, education, representation, and mobilization, UNCCRC has taken a leadership position in advancing community goals. UNCCRC has supported the development of Youth Civic Programs (Action Item 12), for example, by sponsoring a Community Vacation Camp with support from Dr. Constance Clark, the superintendent of Westbury Public Schools, and the Town of North Hempstead.

Tracking Progress: Many Accomplishments

Many New Cassel residents feel their community is both cleaner and safer than it was in the 1980s and 1990s. For some, there is a feeling of accomplishment, excitement, and promise. A review of the New Cassel Vision Plan Action Matrix indicates considerable success and continuing progress, with greater accomplishments where there are defined areas of responsibility, experience and expertise, and sufficient funding. This table on the following page provides a summary of the progress on the Vision Action Plan Implementation Matrix:

Progress on the New Cassel Vision Action Plan Implementation Matrix

Vision Action Plan Action Items	Summary of Progress
1. (Housing Code) Enforcement	■ Good progress: requires continuing effort.
2. Community Cleanup	■ Good progress: requires continuing effort.
3. Funding (for Revitalization)	■ Good progress: requires continuing effort and will be affected by the current global financial crisis.
4. Community Art	■ In development: as part of Prospect Avenue Streetscape Projects (Town RFPs April 2008).
5. Community Asset Building	■ Substantial early progress: but difficult to maintain.
6. Traffic Engineering Study	■ In development: as part of Prospect Avenue Streetscape Projects (TNH RFPs April 2008).
7. Pedestrian Safety	■ In development: as part of Prospect Avenue Streetscape Projects (TNH RFPs April 2008).
8. Streetscape Program	■ In development: as part of Prospect Avenue Streetscape Projects (TNH RFPs April 2008).
9. Gateways	■ Good start: Site A almost complete; NYS Brownfield grant in place to assess additional gateways.
10. New Codes and Design Guidelines	■ Complete. TNH adopted Vision Plan in March 2003; expanded New Cassel Urban Renewal Plan to include Vision Plan in July 2003; revised zoning in September 2003.
11. Façade Improvements	■ Some progress: requires additional development.
12. Youth Civic Program	■ Substantial but insufficient progress: UNCCRC Summer Youth Camp. Additional programs needed.
13. Parks	■ Good progress: Improvements in Martin “Bunky” Reid Park; Swalm Park in design; parks require continuing maintenance.
14. Community Multi-Use Center	■ In development: construction to begin in 2009.

Abbreviations: NYS = New York State, RFP = Request for Proposal, TNH = Town of North Hempstead

Turning to the more traditional physical elements of suburban redevelopment, residents and neighbors from nearby communities note with delight the new construction in downtown New Cassel, which includes mixed-use buildings and increased affordable housing.

In October 2003, the Town Community Development Agency, in cooperation with the Town and County, issued RFPs for seven of eight redevelopment sites and received 34 proposals. (The eighth site will be developed by UNCCRC and a private developer, with eventual plans for UNCCRC to manage the property.) Several factors facilitated this process: a community supported Vision Plan that outlined the desires of the residents; the Town’s ownership of many sites; prior attention to brownfields and underused sites; and the physical infrastructure (such as sewers and other utilities) that was already in place.

The progress on Site A—from a vacant lot, to the plans, to the new building, which is approximately 95% complete—is illustrated below as an example. Note the Christmas tree overlaid on Picture 3. Providing a wonderful physical symbol which supports community social infrastructure, the developer, the Bluestone Organization, is coordinating with UNCCRC to plant a tree for the annual New Cassel Christmas tree lighting ceremony.



As with the Vision Plan goals, the Town CDA urban renewal plans are ambitious and lay out a clear direction. Progress has been substantial but not uniform. This is normal. Real estate development is a sequential process, dependent, not only on the complex steps inherent in building construction, but also on multiple layers of government, financial institutions, and the economy.

Progress on the New Cassel Urban Renewal Sites

Urban Renewal Site Name and Progress	Site Summary
Site A (Gateway to New Cassel): 701 Prospect Avenue <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Progress as of November 15, 2008: approximately 95% complete. Estimated completion time: December 2008. Now developing advertisements for housing rentals and business leases. The Bluestone Organization is the developer. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <u>Housing</u>: 57 rental units, underground parking garage, gateway park <u>Commercial</u> sq. ft.: 20,400. Forecasted businesses include a restaurant, deli, dentist, and beauty supply company.
Site B: 733—735 Prospect Avenue <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Progress as of November 15, 2008: approximately 70% complete. Estimated completion time: Spring 2009. Sterling Financial is the new developer. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <u>Housing</u>: 24 rental units <u>Commercial</u> sq. ft.: 12,000. Forecasted businesses are a grocery store and a coffee shop.
Site C: 816—822 Prospect Avenue <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Progress as of November 15, 2008: approximately 80% complete. Estimated completion time: Spring 2009. Sterling Financial is the new developer. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <u>Housing</u>: 24 rental units <u>Commercial</u> sq. ft.: 3,800. Forecasted businesses are a bank and a convenience store.
Site D: 839 Prospect Avenue <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Progress as of November 15, 2008: approximately 95% complete. Estimated completion time: Spring 2009. The developer is changing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <u>Housing and commercial</u>: 6 mixed-use row-buildings (3 condominiums, 3 rentals). Owner must occupy business or residential space. <u>Forecasted businesses</u> are a cell phone store and an athletic shoe store.

Urban Renewal Site Name and Progress	Site Summary
Site E: Prospect Avenue at Bond Street <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Progress as of November 15, 2008: construction not started. Estimated completion time: 2010. The Sheldrake Organization and UNCCRC are the developers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <u>Housing plans</u>: 3-story, 36-unit townhouse complex. Each unit with 3 bedrooms and one-car garage.
Site F: 512—514 Union Avenue <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Progress as of November 15, 2008: approximately 85% complete. Estimated completion time: Spring 2009. Anna Philip Kimmel Foundation and Douglaston Development are the developers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <u>Housing</u>: 35 units, a combination of live-work, studio, and one-bed room apartments, including some senior citizen housing
Site G: 542 Union Avenue <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Progress as of November 15, 2008: 100% complete. Owner Wheatley Hills Nursery was the developer. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <u>Commercial</u>: expansion of existing nursery and flower shop (business opened in 2001)
Site H (the Demonstration Project): 821 Prospect Avenue <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Progress as of November 15, 2008: approximately 99% complete. Estimated completion time: December 2008. A & C Development Partners is the developer. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <u>Housing</u>: 7 duplex units, owner plus rental over commercial space <u>Commercial</u>: 3,600 sq. ft. Forecasted business is a pharmacy.

Lessons Learned: Successes and Challenges

Pioneered in New Cassel and elsewhere, social change techniques are now spreading throughout Long Island and to other geographic areas. Sustainable Long Island has served as an important focal point to provide this shared learning. Among the positive lessons learned in New Cassel are:

- Despite the “odds”—the prior failures and complex, constantly-changing challenges inherent in multiple-stakeholder revitalization programs—success is clearly possible.
- Formal community participation fuels energy and optimism as well as government revitalization processes. It also helps to ensure that suburban renewal initiatives actually address community wants and needs.
- Government partnerships can work to the benefit of communities: in this case, partnerships among the Town of North Hempstead, Town Community Development Agency, Nassau County, New York State, and federal agencies all worked together to benefit New Cassel. Partnerships of this type require both significant political will and considerable collaborative effort.
- A third-party organization with expertise in participatory planning and community asset building, such as Sustainable Long Island, can be instrumental in bringing diverse community members and government officials together to redefine the decision-making structure and to develop the networks and processes that can sustain long-term development.
- A strong mandate from the community is one of the keys to successful fundraising. Many

government officials interviewed for this study indicate that the ability to refer to the New Cassel Vision Plan and to coordinate with a community-based organization (UNCCRC) increased their ability to obtain funds.

- The formalization of the legal partnership instilled confidence in many community stakeholders that the public sector was committed to the planning process. This approach can contribute to the effectiveness of many future participatory efforts.
- As in other areas of the United States, a faith-based approach, involving the participation of multiple religious organizations, can be effective in mobilizing communities even—and perhaps, especially—where there is a history of discrimination and neglect.
- When part of a substantive and disciplined process, large-scale vision charrettes can be catalytic and regenerate optimism.
- An effective block captain program can serve as an effective communication system and mobilize resident participation.
- Community organizations can take responsibility for achieving goals, not simply representing a community. By sponsoring block captain and summer youth programs, UNCCRC demonstrates its ability to provide services on its own as well as in concert with others.
- The willingness of businesses to invest in communities makes a crucial difference.

Of course, the process has not been without difficulties. These include the improprieties exhibited by some government officials; construction and financial problems experienced by property developers; contention over the appropriateness of union labor; racial discord; and disagreements within the community and among the organizations working to support the revitalization. Outstanding challenges include:

- Development and revitalization processes are long and slow. It is challenging for both the government and for civic organizations, including UNCCRC, to sustain both funding and community participation.
- Throughout Long Island—and common to many renewal projects around the world—builders, non-profits, and community stakeholders often complain about the time and costs of bringing a construction project from conception to the start of construction.
- Awarding multiple projects to a single real estate developer in a revitalization project of this size increases the level of risk, especially in economic downturns.
- There are genuine conflicts in the New Cassel community. Political power counts and is uneven in the community. Change always generates opposition and the struggle to confront and address conflict can be viewed as an important part of the development process.

- Jobs, job training, and union involvement in construction projects are big, complex, and systemic issues.
- The term *affordable housing* has many different meanings. Local government officials and residents are aware that federal definitions do not address the needs of all New Cassel residents.

A review of other revitalization initiatives indicates that efforts in New Cassel face obstacles that are not just local in nature: long-standing patterns of privilege and discrimination; onerous government bureaucratic processes; and lack of sufficient funding for affordable housing, public transportation, education, and other elements of suburban revitalization. It is important that local measures are complemented with efforts at the national and global levels.

Recommendations for strengthening community processes include additional community asset building; facilitation of networks of mid-level players; use of a balanced scorecard approach in developing community goals; and transparent tracking of community vision plans. Future research studies of the systemic problems often encountered in urban and suburban redevelopment are also indicated. Because every revitalization situation is different and the situation in New Cassel itself changes over time, no single “cookie-cutter” plan will be effective. Each situation should be carefully considered before assuming these lessons apply.

With many successes to celebrate, community revitalization in New Cassel is an on-going process. The stakeholders who shared these lessons hope that others will benefit from them and will, in turn, share their own learning.