

Community Revitalization in New Cassel, New York

Executive Summary

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Research conducted for:



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Executive Summary

This study documents the history, successes, key factors, and lessons learned during the recent, and continuing, New Cassel community revitalization, focusing on the decade from 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 twentieth century. By the 2000 census, 47% of New Cassel 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 of Latino/Hispanic (Hispanic is the word used by the US census) population (all races) of any community in Nassau County (41%).

At the turn of the twenty-first 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 precipitating factors which may have interacted to create a need for revitalization, including but not limited to:

- 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 twentieth 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 plan for the development of Long Island that adequately responded to the changing and diverse needs of all Long Islanders.

Catalysts for Change in New Cassel

Reverend Patrick Duggan, then Executive Director of Sustainable Long Island and Bishop (then Reverend) Lionel Harvey, Chairman of the Unified New Cassel Revitalization Corporation (UNCCRC)—helped to create the conditions under which discouraged and divided community residents could come together and form an organization (UNCCRC) with a unified agenda that represented all stakeholders in New Cassel. 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 resident 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 for 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, hired by Sustainable Long Island and UNCCRC, Dan Burden, a nationally recognized authority on pedestrian-friendly planning and design, and a team of urban planners facilitated 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 listing 14 Action Items with planned activities designated with short, medium, and long-term steps.

Political will and effective government partnerships were and are 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).

Well before the Visioning Charrette and the resulting Plan, local officials had begun to support the revitalization process. As Rev. Duggan and Rev. (now Bishop) Harvey were initially engaging the residents, then Town of North Hempstead Supervisor May Newburger publicly acknowledged that the Town had ignored New Cassel, committed to help the community, and began a lobbying effort with the goal of providing 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 with the Town, to identify public and private investment to implement the community's vision. A recent example includes negotiations he orchestrated with Neptune Regional Transmission System (RTS) as it was locating in New Cassel for a \$10 million contribution that will support the design and construction of a community multi-use center (Action Item 14) and other community goals.

The Vision Plan has informed all of the subsequent development planning processes and, not incidentally, also provides ample evidence of community participation, required in many cases 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—which will open the community’s only branch bank at Redevelopment Site C—as the first Banking Development District (BDD) in Nassau County.

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). It is projected that, over the next five years, these certified businesses will 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 provides a summary of the progress on the Vision Action Plan Implementation Matrix:

Vision Action Plan Action Items	Summary of Progress
1. (Housing Code) Enforcement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Good progress: requires continuing effort.
2. Community Cleanup	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Good progress: requires continuing effort.
3. Funding (for Revitalization)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Good progress: requires continuing effort and will be affected by the current global financial crisis.
4. Community Art	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ In development: as part of Prospect Avenue Streetscape Projects (Town RFPs April 2008).
5. Community Asset Building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Substantial early progress: but difficult to maintain.
6. Traffic Engineering Study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ In development: as part of Prospect Avenue Streetscape Projects (TNH RFPs April 2008).

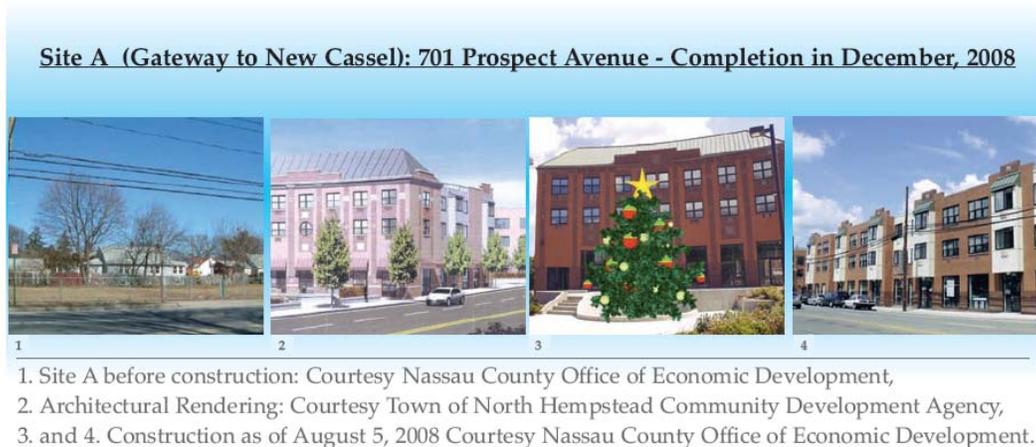
Vision Action Plan Action Items	Summary of Progress
7. Pedestrian Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In development: as part of Prospect Avenue Streetscape Projects (TNH RFPs April 2008).
8. Streetscape Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In development: as part of Prospect Avenue Streetscape Projects (TNH RFPs April 2008).
9. Gateways	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Good start: Site A almost complete; NYS Brownfield grant in place to assess additional gateways.
10. New Codes and Design Guidelines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some progress: requires additional development.
12. Youth Civic Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Substantial but insufficient progress: UNCCRC Summer Youth Camp. Additional programs needed.
13. Parks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Good progress: Swalm Park in design; parks require continuing maintenance.
14. Community Multi-Use Center	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In development: as part of Prospect Avenue Streetscape Projects (TNH RFPs April 2008).

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 sites and received 34 proposals, indicating the willingness of nearby real estate developers to invest in New Cassel. Several factors facilitated development: a community supported Vision Plan that outlined the desires of the residents, the Town’s ownership of many development 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 90% complete—is illustrated below as an example. Note the Christmas tree overlaid on Picture 3. In a wonderful combination of positive physical and 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.

Site Name and Progress	Site Summary
<p>Site A (Gateway to New Cassel): 701 Prospect Avenue</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Completion as of August 15, 2008: approximately 90% 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, 4,500 sq. ft. park <u>Commercial</u> sq. ft.: 20,400. Forecasted businesses include a restaurant, deli, dentist, and beauty supply company.
<p>Site B: 733—735 Prospect Avenue</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Completion as of August 15, 2008: approximately 75% 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.
<p>Site C: 816—822 Prospect Avenue</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Completion as of August 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.
<p>Site D: 839 Prospect Avenue</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Completion as of August 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 and an athletic shoe store.
<p>Site E: Prospect Avenue at Bond Street</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Completion as of August 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.
<p>Site F: 512—514 Union Avenue</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Completion as of August 15, 2008: approximately 50% 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
<p>Site G: 542 Union Avenue</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Completion as of August 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)
<p>Site H (the Demonstration Project): 821 Prospect Avenue</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Completion as of August 15, 2008: approximately 95% 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

Many of the lessons learned in this process are positive and have already been described. Social change techniques, pioneered in New Cassel and elsewhere, are now spreading throughout Long Island and to other geographic areas. Sustainable Long Island is an important focal point for this shared learning.

The process has not been without difficulties. These include the improprieties on the part of some involved government officials, financial problems on the part of property developers, contention over the appropriateness of union labor, and disagreements within the community and among the organizations working to support the revitalization.

A review of the long-standing and widespread nature of these problems with a systems theory perspective indicates that any local revitalization effort faces national and global-scale obstacles in 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 concerted efforts at the national and global scale. In a globally-connected world, it is important that residents and NGOs be broadly connected, contributing to and learning from others engaged in supporting community health at the national and international level.

Among the lessons learned, and re-learned, through experience in the last several years are:

- A third party organization with expertise in participatory planning techniques 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.
- It is challenging for both the government and for civic organizations including UNCCRC to sustain both funding and community participation. Throughout the Long Island region—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 project from conception to construction. It is important to find both the political will and expertise necessary to streamline the bureaucratic process while maintaining safeguards and transparency.
- Awarding multiple projects to a single real estate developer in a revitalization project of this size increases the level of risk, especially in times of economic downturns. Real estate developments in New Cassel face greater risk and lower expected return on investment than developments in wealthier communities. While it was good news that a number of regional developers bid on New Cassel projects, the quantity and diversity of bids was disappointing. The CDA, supported by the Town and County, addressed this issue in part by opening a second, extended round of the RFP process but cannot reasonably be held responsible for long-standing patterns of economic behavior.
- 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.

As evidenced by the significant body of literature in this area and the many organizations whose primary focus is to help address community conflict, this is hardly unique to New Cassel. It is interesting to note, for instance, that the State of California Attorney General's Office of Community Relations Service offers conflict resolution services, with emphasis

on areas similar to those in which New Cassel experienced difficulties (schools, gangs, civil rights, and competition for resources, as examples).

- When part of a substantive and disciplined process, large scale Vision Charrettes can be catalytic and regenerate optimism.
- Jobs, jobs training, and unions are big, complex, and systemic issues. Again, this is a common problem, addressed with varying success by other communities. Here the players could benefit by building on their successful experience in the Vision Planning Charrette to develop a series of outreach and formal facilitation processes to engage unions, developers, on-site employers, and residents in discussions to uncover shared values and explore methods to create well-paying and secure employment.
- The term *affordable housing* has many different meanings. Both local government officials and residents are well aware that federal definitions do not address the needs of all New Cassel residents. This presents a significant challenge that must be addressed at regional and national levels.
- The formalization of the legal partnership instilled confidence in many community stakeholders that the public sector was firmly committed to the planning process. This approach can contribute to the effectiveness of many future participatory efforts
- Independent school districts are local sources of expertise and can make substantive contributions to the planning process, especially in the understanding of, and improvement in, services for youth.
- To be effective, redevelopment efforts must engage a wide range of stakeholders, mediate existing and new disputes that threaten the revitalization process, and provide stakeholders with the resources needed to participate in the decision-making process.

Value-based leadership techniques—which identify and use shared values to motivate independent behavior—have been shown to be effective in a variety of situations where authority and power are distributed and, therefore, are likely be helpful in suburban revitalization programs.

- Participatory community processes benefit from substantive community asset building and the development of horizontal networks of mid-level players from all sectors. With appropriate funding, current efforts could be accelerated by drawing on programs already in use around the country.

For example, the Pew Partnership for Civic Change, founded to help generate strategies helpful for making communities stronger, offers a Leadership Plenty Institute which has generated results in other regions of the United States.

- This and other community development and ongoing maintenance projects would benefit from an information and tracking focal point (such as online project tracking and a balanced scorecard with a supporting document repository).

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.

Additional Credits

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