

Metawanene Hills Neighborhood Association and Flint American Institute of Architects Master Plan Summary

Community Building and Civic Engagement

Effective civic engagement that leads to sustained community change requires different groups taking on specific roles and working across and among the partners for the desired outcome. It is an interdependent infrastructure linking bottom up, on-the-ground resident engagement with policy tools, change strategies, issue advocacy, and a continuum of resources to support systems change and build strong, healthy, and attractive communities.

The AIA Flint/MHNA charrette process engaged participants in four community planning teams: residential, commercial, Ramona Park and its expansion, and Cook School (an historic structure, owned by Flint Community Schools and currently closed), which allowed individual participants to offer unique contributions in shaping their community of the future. The Community Planning Teams were led by local architects partnered with MHNA members in the facilitation of each teams' effort from collecting visual evidence of assets to identifying areas for change and revitalization. Local architects provided design advice and strategic input while community members and stakeholders provided their vision for an enhanced and revitalized community, local information, feedback and critique.

Based on the results of the visioning and priority setting meeting, the community service project evolved into a community building and civic engagement process, with the goal of developing a master plan. The service area included MHNA neighborhood boundaries and key points of interest contiguous to MHNA boundaries. MHNA boundaries include Martin Luther King, Jr Blvd to the east, Chevrolet Avenue to the west, Stockdale Avenue to the north and 10th Street to the South. This visioning and priority setting meeting was followed by three community charrettes, which took place during the period of January-April 2008.

The Importance of the Master Plan

The master plan represents a comprehensive set of problem solving, stabilizing, and turn-around strategies for the Metawanene Hills Community, envisioned by residents of the community in partnership with Flint AIA members. We know that top-down strategies alone do not work. Meaningful and lasting change occurs when a community can own the outcomes of change strategies emanating from the bottom or the grassroots and supported by a continuum of resources from planning, technical and design assistance to project financing and capital support.

The timing of our master plan development is also opportunistic. At the outset of our planning process, we learned that both Hurley Hospital and Whaley Children's Center were engaged in their own planning and visioning process. Whaley's plans for change called for adding residential housing for its children and youth population, modest in comparison to its immediate neighbor to the south, city owned and operated, Hurley Hospital. Hurley's plan included broad and comprehensive revitalization including the demolition of abandoned houses directly to the east and south of their complex, greening vacant land, increasing walkability, moving its main public entrance from the north to the south side of the campus, and workplace incentives encouraging employees to live close to where they work.

Of key significance in our plan is linking the strong residential Metawanene Hills neighborhood to the institutional planning scenarios of both Whaley Children's Center and Hurley Hospital. It is our view

that much is to be gained for the stability and revitalization of the City of Flint, if these two institutions acknowledge and include the near north neighborhood of Metawanene Hills in their planning efforts. (*See Ramona Park expansion component for an example of a potential physical and environmental link*)

The Metawanene Hills Community can be described as a community “in the middle” (Source: *Great Neighborhoods, Great City*, 2004 update). The profile of an “in the middle” neighborhood is one that is attractive, stable, in good repair, does not register high rates of crime and vacancy, yet attracts limited investment. The early 20th century architecture was built to last, is affordable, and offers ease of proximity to downtown and the arts and entertainment corridor. We believe that Metawanene Hills is a neighborhood that is vital to the future of the City of Flint.

Master Plan Components

Commercial

Residents and business owners participating in the development of the master plan identified a number of commercial areas located within the boundaries of the neighborhood which have long been neglected by retailers, developers, and local government. Although some businesses in the area have managed to endure hardships, and continue to successfully operate, the majority are in great need of support. Areas of particular importance include commercial nodes which were identified as “gateways” to the community, and are located at the four corners of the neighborhood” M.L. King Avenue and Welch Blvd; Welch Blvd and Chevrolet Avenue; Flushing Road and Chevrolet; and Flushing Road and M.L. King Avenue.

Residential

The master plan residential component includes three categories for change, revitalization, and partnership:

- 1) Establishing residential design standards guidelines for future modifications to help protect the aesthetic and historic character of the community and preserving it for future generations.
- 2) Designation of key regions as an Historic District. On several key streets such as Welch Blvd, Neome Drive, North Grand Traverse, and Copeman many large residences were built, many with European influences. Key architectural styles represented include: Tudor Revival, Cape Cod, Prairie Style, Victorian, Four Square and Gambrel with many situated on large lots. The interior of many of these homes reflect one-of-a-kind architectural craftsmanship. Many of these structures have original exterior doors, including garage doors. In addition to the strong residential architectural history, captains of Flints' various industries built homes for their families in the Metawanene Community. One of the Hamady homes sits at 1647 Neome Drive. Bob Hamady attended Cook School. The original home of the James Lumber Family sits at 230 Welch Blvd. A member of the Mott/Kleinpell family built an impressive mansion at the corner of Welch Blvd and North Grand Traverse.
- 3) Development of a new residential building for the Whaley Children's Center facility. A critically important aspect of our plan is linking the strong residential Metawanene Hills Community to Whaley's campus expansion. Our goal is to encourage collaborative planning that will integrate their institutional planning into the fabric of the neighborhood versus the use of defensive design strategies, often employed by institutional planners. More and more people are interested in living near their workplace, an attitude that is supported by a recent Hurley Hospital survey. Hurley Hospital sits to the immediate south of Whaley Children's Center and with some 2500 employees, both of these institutions holds the potential to create a 'critical mass' of potential residents, customers, and users.

Cook School

Cook Elementary School is an architectural gem and community landmark. Currently vacant, the Cook School building and site creates an important destination as well as symbolizing the neighborhood's identity. Cook School terminates the North Grand Traverse streetscape, a major connector to downtown.

Symbolically and historically, the school is the keystone to the community identity. In many cases, several generations within a family attended the school. The educational institution is the common thread that links generations of former students, and weaves the fabric that creates the sense of Place within the Metawanene Hills Community. Adaptive reuse of the structure would provide much needed services while protecting a landmark historic structure from certain demolition.

The J.R. and Mary Stockdale Family sold several hundred acres of farm land to developers in the early 20th century to create parcels for homes in the Metawanene Hills Community, development of Cook School and Hurley Hospital, and adjacent business districts. The original Stockdale Farmhouse sits at the intersection of Euclid and Stockdale Avenue. In 1908, The Stockdale Estate contributed \$70,000 for the initial construction of Hurley Hospital.

The land for Cook School was purchased in 1916. Cook School started as four, two-story temporary wood frame buildings. The beautiful brick permanent building was completed in time for the September 1917 school year. The original Cook School buildings, four, two-storied frame houses in various stages of disrepair, remain in the neighborhood on the northeast corner of Stockdale Avenue and Mason Street.

Ramona Park

Ramona Park, a small, wedge-shaped green space, nestled in the center of the neighborhood, has been identified as a high priority project. The expansion of Ramona Park holds significance in linking the strong, near-north residential Metawanene Hills neighborhood to the institutional planning scenarios of both Whaley Children's Center and Hurley Hospital. The MHNA has taken an active role in the upkeep of the park and maintenance of the existing park. The natural grade of the area creates a bowl at the intersection of North Grand Traverse Street and Stone Street where drainage patterns cause occasional flooding. The natural pattern of runoff and water retention provides a unique opportunity to engage in an urban wetland restoration.

A concentration of well-kept, owner-occupied housing faces onto the park giving evidence to its importance as a neighborhood landmark. Directly adjacent and to the south of the current park are several very small, blighted homes, situated between vacant lots. Much of this property is owned by the Genesee County Land Bank. MHNA is currently in negotiation with the Land Bank to acquire ownership of these properties for the Ramona Park expansion.

The proposed design of the expanded park takes into account walkability, accessibility, wetland and housing restoration, neighborhood identity and connection to a network of greenways. The expanded Ramona Park will serve as an enticement to draw recreational and fitness walkers from the campuses of Hurley Hospital and Whaley Children's Center. The park design incorporates a one-mile and two-mile pathway system from the Hurley Hospital to the north. The route passes through the park, with the longer pathway continuing to Cook School.

MHNA recently entered a partnership with Michigan State University that will pilot a land management project experimenting with weed control techniques.

