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The Elm Street Program

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As a Pennsylvania state legislator, I have had a long-term commitment to protecting and revitalizing our state's older communities, including my home town of Easton, located sixty miles north of Philadelphia. Viewed through the prism of the rural-urban transect, Pennsylvania's settlement pattern once included a broad mosaic of distinctive places: largely untouched natural environments, rich agricultural regions dotted with villages and small towns, small to medium-sized cities that serve as county commercial centers, and larger cities such as Pittsburgh and Philadelphia in industrial regions and along major metropolitan corridors. Over the last few decades, however, this

historic pattern of differentiated environments has been transformed by sprawl development, which has blurred the transition from town to country and sapped older urban areas of vitality.

Although such suburban-style development now predominates throughout America, its emergence had more to do with the unforeseen consequences of government policies than market forces or conscious consumer choice. For example, the Federal Housing Administration and Veterans Administration loan programs of the 1940s dramatically altered banking practices and construction requirements. Making home-mortgage interest tax deductible also provide a huge subsidy for suburban single-family home construction. And single-use zoning and construction of the Interstate Highway system further fueled sprawl and urban disinvestment. Today institutionalized govern-

Above: A typical Elm Street in Pennsylvania. Baltimore Ave. in Philadelphia.
Photo by Sandy Sorlien.

ment policies and practices continue to perpetuate this form of development.

However, the one public policy that proved most devastating to America's towns and cities, was urban renewal. In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs outlined both the folly and tragedy of this policy, which emerged from the well-intentioned but misguided slum-clearance initiatives of the Great Depression to tear apart the finely woven fabric of many cities.

Using the transect as a perspective, one can see how Urban Renewal and other more recent initiatives have severely damaged urban neighborhoods by introducing anti-urban models. First came the now-infamous tower-in-the-park public housing projects. These were followed by all manner of suburban building typologies with inappropriate setbacks and excessive surface parking that turned formerly vital urban blocks into windswept wastelands. The devastating effects of suburban sprawl and misguided redevelopment on the older communities in our state has been clearly identified in the Brookings Institution study "Back to Prosperity: A Comprehensive Agenda for Renewing Pennsylvania."

Since government policy got us into this mess, it will take remedial government action to get us out. My Elm Street Program, enacted in Pennsylvania in 2004, provides a way to reclaim our older urban communities. It is designed to target older urban residential neighborhoods for revival, undo the damage done by earlier renewal and suburbanization efforts, and provide the resources, organization and direction to bring stability and vitality back to our cities. Pennsylvania's urban neighborhoods were once great places to live, work, socialize, and raise a family. They can be great places once again.

Inspiration for Elm Street

Inspiration for my Elm Street concept came from several sources, including Pennsylvania's Main Street program. Building on a national initiative, Pennsylvania has a wonderful Main Street Program that is breathing new life into some of our older downtowns. Through the use of facade grants, streetscape improvements, and the oversight and initiative of professional Main Street managers, it is bringing a much-needed facelift to many older downtowns, positioning these once-vibrant districts to attract new businesses.

One shortcoming of the Main Street Program has been its singular focus on commercial property, however. It has been largely blind to how the success of an urban commercial district is inextricably related to that of the residential

neighborhoods surrounding it. Such residential neighborhoods need renewed attention if we are to complete the revival of older urban areas. No commercial core can long survive unless the residential fabric around it is also healthy, stable and successful.

One of the other great inspirations for my Elm Street Program was my experience growing up in Easton's ethnically and racially diverse West Ward. That experience taught me the best and most enduring lessons of community. In those days the West Ward was a place of corner stores and neighborhood schools where people knew their neighbors and looked out for each other. My younger brother and I could walk downtown to movie theaters, lunch counters, five-and-dimes, and local department stores without parental supervision. Although today the old neighborhood has changed somewhat, much of the West Ward remains a pedestrian-friendly area with all the essential ingredients to foster a sense of place.

However, it was another Easton neighborhood that taught me the important connection that needs to exist between a commercial downtown and its residential neighborhoods. Easton once had a close-knit Lebanese-American neighborhood adjacent to its business district. Home to hundreds of families and scores of family-owned businesses, this area had housed a succession of immigrant groups over the years, who later moved on to other neighborhoods as their fortunes improved. Yet as long as this neighborhood remained occupied, providing a built in customer base for downtown stores, local merchants could survive competition from the newly built shopping centers on the edge of town.

Unfortunately, this neighborhood was the target of Urban Renewal and was torn down and cleared away for new development. Today it is the site of a worn and shabby suburban-style motel, a defunct multiscreen movie house, fast-food restaurants, and a dingy strip mall. Surrounded by parking lots, these mostly one-story, single-purpose structures fail to relate to the city around them.

The lesson learned was that older downtown business districts need stable adjacent residential neighborhoods to ensure their stability. This is the essence of the Elm Street concept.

Elements of the Program

Like its predecessor, the Main Street Program, Elm Street focuses on physical improvements, and utilizes a professional manager to coordinate the efforts of local officials, community and business organizations, and the public to formulate and implement a revitalization plan.

The Elm Street designation is available to any “geographic area which has consisted of buildings and structures for housing individuals and families.” However, such a neighborhood must have existed since before 1961, and priority is given to neighborhoods that existed prior to 1951. A “mixed-use” neighborhood also qualifies. The area must also be in “close proximity” to a Main Street Program project or an existing commercial district. While the legislation does not define “close proximity,” the Department of Community and Economic Development, which administers the program, has set this at an approximate distance of up to half a mile from the commercial district. DCED and the Pennsylvania Downtown Center, which is assisting with the program, have further recommended that the neighborhood take in an area roughly half a mile from center to edge, or one mile across.

To qualify a neighborhood for Elm Street designation, a municipality or its designated agency must meet several conditions: it must identify the boundaries of the target neighborhood; it must demonstrate that the neighborhood is in need of revitalization; it must offer evidence of support for the program by local residents, merchants, and government officials; and it must provide a 10 percent minimum match for any grant funding (although this can be reduced or waived if a hardship exists¹).

Grant Types

The program encompasses a number of different grant types: residential reinvestment grants for specific physical improvements; operational grants to help hire an Elm Street manager; and planning and development grants for a variety of other activities.

Among the types of infrastructure and structural needs that may qualify for residential reinvestment grants are street improvements, streetlights, trees, building exteriors, sidewalks, and other pedestrian features. Communities do not need to have full Elm Street designation to qualify for these; they simply need to meet the Elm Street criteria. Such improvements are very helpful in changing a neighborhood’s image, encouraging privately funded renovations and infill construction, and helping market the area to prospective new residents.

Administrative grants are used to cover operational and administrative costs associated with a professional manager for up to five years, while planning grants may be used to help prepare applications for full-fledged Elm Street designation.

Planning and development grants are also available in a number of key areas. These include marketing and

promoting urban residential living; leveraging additional private and public investments; promoting homeownership and other housing options; addressing blight, crime, employment opportunities, and public services and amenities; and achieving consistency with existing commercial and residential revitalization plans.

Of the above areas, promotional and marketing activities can be extremely useful in helping to overcome neighborhood image problems in order to attract new residents and investment. Neighborhood-wide marketing and promotion can be effective in achieving a critical mass of renovations and interest in a targeted neighborhood, comparable to the technique of packaging a new suburban development.

Promoting homeownership is also essential. Most Elm Street-type neighborhoods have large numbers of renters, and a high percentage of absentee landlords may lead to maintenance problems that make it difficult to attract new residents and investment. By contrast, homeowners normally have a stake in the success of a neighborhood and are more willing to get involved in revival efforts. Care must be taken, however, not to displace existing low-income residents. Those who have stayed in a troubled neighborhood through hard times deserve to be rewarded for their perseverance. Ideally, an Elm Street manager can be a broker between landlords interested in selling and long-term tenants interested in buying.

Consistency with existing revitalization plans is important because it can help promote links between commercial districts and surrounding residential neighborhoods—a core principle behind the Elm Street concept.

A Professional Manager

An important figure in the program is the Elm Street manager. This position can be full or part time. The Elm Street manager may also be designated as an assistant to an existing Main Street manager in the community.

In addition to implementing the five-year program for a full-fledged Elm Street neighborhood, the Elm Street manager may perform other useful services. One such critical task may be to review the condition of educational and recreational facilities. Attractive parks can provide focal points for neighborhood interaction, enhance desirability and property values, and show tangible signs of a turnaround. Likewise, a neighborhood school, can serve as a community anchor and attract families who prefer small, personalized learning environments to large suburban campuses. Such a school can also serve as a neighborhood center, facilitating the community-building process.

The Elm Street manager can also help determine if the local comprehensive plan, zoning, and other land use ordinances foster neighborhood vitality. Such documents should encourage and require a mix of commercial, civic, employment, and residential uses, with particular attention to diversity of housing options. Mixed use promotes vitality by providing more opportunities for neighbors to interact. Random encounters at coffee shops, restaurants, corner stores, and neighborhood taverns encourage neighbors to get to know one another, share concerns, and act collectively to address problems.

A review of zoning ordinances can be particularly useful. Too many urban communities have adopted boiler-plate suburban zoning codes with setbacks and parking requirements that make little sense in an urban setting. Such codes can undermine pedestrian-friendly qualities and destroy the scale and relationship of urban buildings to streets. Single-use zoning also undermines efforts to create lively, mixed-use neighborhoods.

The rural-urban transect provides a framework for sorting out the details of streets, buildings, public spaces, and streetscapes that distinguish urban neighborhoods from suburban ones. Adoption of the Smart Code may further codify needed requirements for infill buildings. Such an understanding has long been absent from municipal zoning in Pennsylvania.

Areas of Emphasis

Overall, the Elm Street guidelines identify five program areas.

The first involves building consensus and cooperation among groups to formulate a vision and carry out the Elm Street mission. The effort here is to foster partnerships, create a volunteer base, engage stakeholders, disseminate information, and tap funding sources.

The second involves successful neighborhood marketing. This could be accomplished through special events, the creation of promotional materials, marketing agreements with real estate agencies, or commercial promotions.

The third seeks to enhance a neighborhood's appearance by capitalizing on its unique urban assets. Activities here might include a baseline property inventory, survey of renovation and code-compliance needs, assessments of public improvement needs, revisions of zoning and other land-use ordinances, and reviews of parking, traffic-calming, and pedestrian-safety needs.

The fourth program area involves strengthening the quality of existing housing while diversifying its type and income mix. This might involve demographic, market

and architectural research. Efforts could also be made to promote a mixed-use strategy for developing vacant property, enforcing building and safety codes, and increasing homeownership.

The final area deals with encouraging clean, safe and green activities. This might include evaluating the maintenance needs of public spaces, inventorying open space and recreational areas, assessing both perceived and real crime rates, and developing positive new initiatives such as community policing, block-watch efforts, community gardens, and the construction of new neighborhood parks.

Greatness Again

To my knowledge, Elm Street is the first program of its kind in the nation. Interest in it was initially so great that a 2004 preapplication meeting had to be moved to a larger auditorium. Consensus among the more than 400 people who attended was that the program was long overdue and just what Pennsylvania's older communities needed. To date, 23 communities have received Elm Street planning grants, more than two dozen have received Elm Street designation, and many more are actively seeking it.

Wherever I speak on the program it seems to resonate with people. I attribute this enthusiasm in part to the program's name. "Elm Street" readily conjures up Norman Rockwell images of small-town America or visions of leafy residential blocks in the many small to mid-size cities that define the Keystone State.

The Elm Street Program will no doubt need further refinement as we gain more experience with it. But I believe it represents the missing piece in the puzzle of urban revitalization. With policy approaches that are sensitive to urban needs, we can begin to reclaim the diverse, dynamic neighborhoods of our older communities.

Elm Street neighborhoods once embodied all the principles of contemporary initiatives such as Smart Growth, New Urbanism, transit-oriented development, and livable communities. They were great places once. With some help from well-reasoned, pro-urban policy making, they can be great again.

Note

1. A hardship is deemed to exist if a municipality was declared financially distressed under the Municipalities Financial Recovery Act; the matching requirement exceeds 5 percent of its operating budget; the target neighborhood participates in Pennsylvania's Weed and Seed Program; or a minimum of 20 percent of its population falls below 150 percent of the federal poverty level.