

NORTH OF LEHIGH NEIGHBORHOOD REVITALIZATION PLAN

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

DECEMBER 2013



_INTERFACE STUDIO LLC

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The North of Lehigh Neighborhood Revitalization Plan was funded by a generous grant from NeighborWorks America. The planning process was led by NKCDC and a Stakeholder Committee comprised of neighborhood residents, local community groups, community institutions, neighborhood-based organizations, elected officials, and city-wide partners. Without the participation of this committed group, the complexity of challenges facing this neighborhood cannot be turned into opportunities.

THANK YOU TO ALL WHO MADE THIS PLAN POSSIBLE:

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NORTH OF LEHIGH NEIGHBORHOOD REVITALIZATION PLAN

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PURPOSE OF THE PLAN

Since 1985 New Kensington Community Development Corporation has worked with, and on behalf of, community residents and partners to strengthen the physical, social, and economic fabric of the community by being a catalyst for sustainable development and community building. Historically, NKCDC had focused on the area south of Lehigh Avenue—the southern border of the plan area. Beginning in 2007, NKCDC began to work more closely with the community represented by this plan. Housing counseling, food referrals, tax rebate assistance, support around sustainability, and other services were provided to interested constituents. Interactions with constituents highlighted the complex issues faced by plan area residents and revealed that residents were strongly interested in improving their community.

NKCDC engaged the community in the area of opportunity in a more formalized way through four volunteer-led studies that began at the end of 2010. These prior efforts informed the North of Lehigh Neighborhood Revitalization Plan and affirmed the recurring themes that concern residents.

The North of Lehigh planning process expands the planning area to include portions of the community that face many of the issues seen within the focused plan area. Stretching between Lehigh Avenue on the south, Clearfield Street on the north, Kensington Avenue on the west, and Aramingo Avenue on the east, the planning process incorporated the community's voice through two community input meetings and door-to-door surveying of 400 residents from the plan area. The process was also more heavily data-driven than the prior volunteer-led studies, relying on data from the Census, the Philadelphia Police Department, and extensive field surveys to depict the challenges faced by the community.

The neighborhood planning process is a forum for neighbors, business owners, investors, and civic leaders to learn and to exchange ideas, to imagine – together – the future of North of Lehigh. This neighborhood plan is a tool for local organizations, residents, and business owners to prioritize their goals and direct their efforts, increase resident involvement and, ultimately, implement positive change. The strategies that are included in this document are the direct result of a resident-driven effort to transform and strengthen the community.

The North of Lehigh Neighborhood Revitalization Plan represents a culmination of close to three years of active engagement with the plan area community. The process of revitalization has long been focused on reinvesting in both people and in place. This purpose of the plan is to:

- > Empower residents as agents of change in North of Lehigh;
- > Significantly reduce criminal activity including, most notably, drug dealing and drug use;
- > Strategically transform empty and blighted land into vibrant green spaces cared for by residents;
- > Spur capital investment North of Lehigh with the Orinoka Mills Complex development;
- > Improve access to local assets and social services;
- > Revitalize Kensington Avenue to better serve the retail needs of local residents;

- > Coordinate the efforts of the city, nonprofit organizations, churches, other institutions, and residents so that everyone is working from the same playbook; and
- > Inform funding decisions and raise money for neighborhood investments.

WHY “NORTH OF LEHIGH” & WHY NOW?

Philadelphia was once one of the nation's industrial leaders—known as the “Workshop of the World”—and Kensington was at its center. As Philadelphia's industrial prominence waned, decades of disinvestment resulted in a changed landscape. Vacant lots and buildings are frequently used for illegal activities, such as drug sales and use, prostitution, and dumping of hazardous waste. The landscape is punctuated by the elevated Market-Frankford line, below which lie scrapyards as well as large and imposing vacant, former industrial sites that also serve as locations for illegal activities. On the once vibrant commercial corridor of Kensington Avenue, retail stores have been replaced by malt-beverage take outs, pawn shops, and check-cashing establishments. And, along the southern edge, the derelict Lehigh Viaduct lays nearly abandoned. Amidst this backdrop, hardworking families attempt to maintain a reasonable quality of life despite many challenges: under-employment and joblessness, high poverty rate, widespread drug activity and related criminal activity, poor educational opportunities, multiple environmental issues, and a sense of powerlessness.

Demographic data reveals a diverse community that is indeed disproportionately impacted by crime, economic, environmental, and social issues. The area is home to one of the largest retail drug markets on the eastern seaboard. It is one of the leading zip codes for offender re-entry in the state. The average median income is less than half the national average and more than 70% of residents are considered to be “doing poorly” according to 2010 census data. Approximately a quarter of Kensington residences lack a sufficient kitchen and close to 20% lack complete plumbing. Affordable housing is commonplace, yet of poor quality. Most houses are small and in poor condition, contributing to one of the highest foreclosure rates in the City and resulting in declining homeownership rates and high vacancy. Housing values have significantly decreased and are valued among the lowest in the city. The poor housing market in Kensington further contributes to crime and disorder problems in the area.

Recognizing these challenges, NKCDC formalized a relationship with this important community north of Lehigh. In the past three years, NKCDC has helped to build the Somerset Neighbors for Better Living (SNBL) civic association, expand resident capacity, complete focused studies to improve

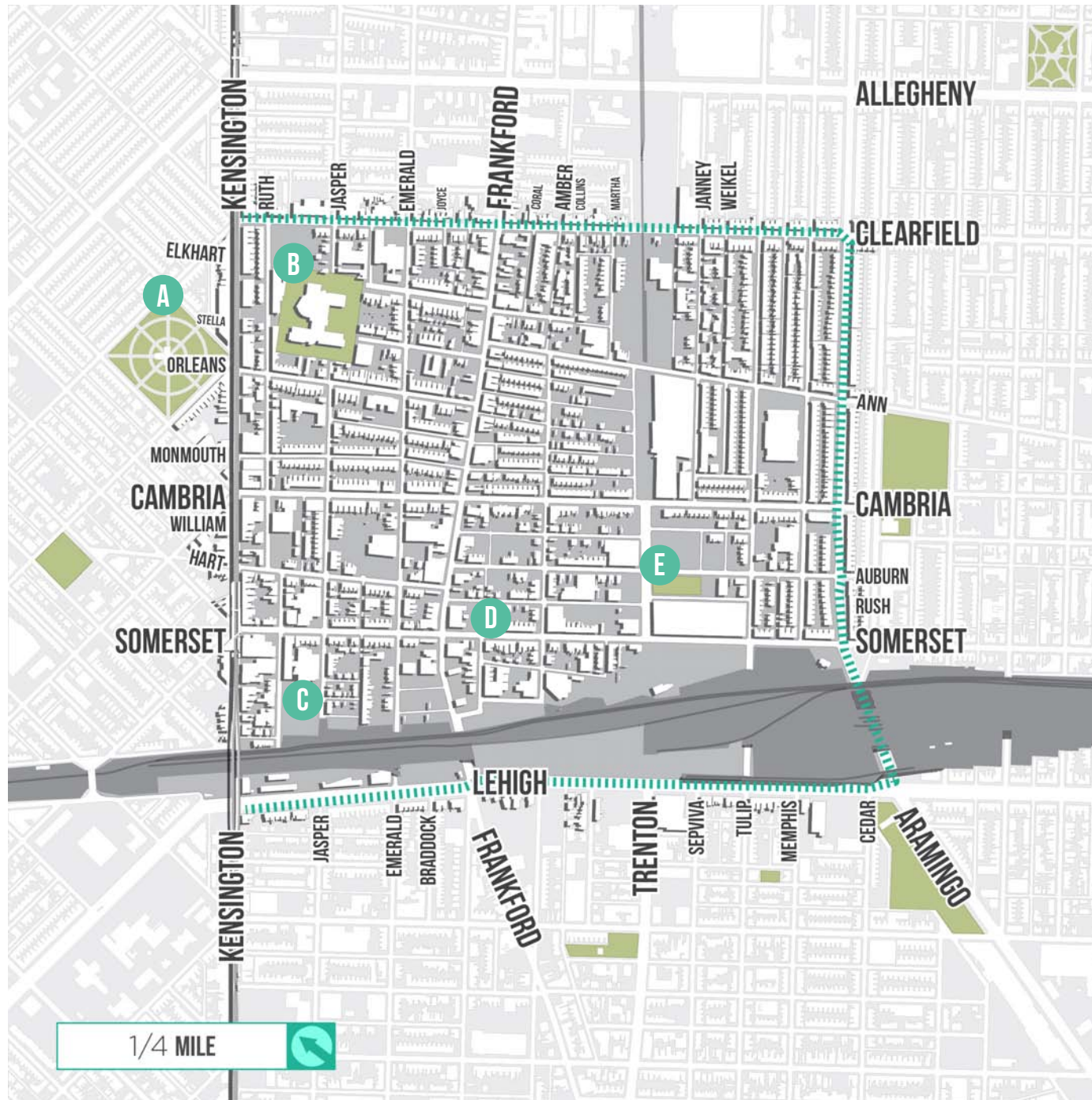


FIGURE 1. PLAN AREA

Notable Community Landmarks

- A - McPherson Square
- B - Francis E. Willard School
- C - Orinoka Mills Complex
- D - Community Women's Education Project
- E - Trenton Playground

THE PLAN AREA IS
APPROXIMATELY **259 ACRES**
IN SIZE AND IS MADE UP OF
188 BLOCKS.

the community, move forward with plans to develop the Orinoka Mills Complex, and organize a number of community clean ups and other events designed to reduce crime / blight while bringing residents together. The momentum that has been built through this process has led to the question – what next? In an effort to create a framework for the future of the community and support the active involvement of residents, NKCDC raised funds to undertake this plan that is the result of three years of community organizing.

To further engage residents, the North of Lehigh Neighborhood Revitalization Plan provided stakeholders with many additional opportunities to voice and fine-tune the changes they desired to see in their neighborhood. The planning process did not mirror a traditional process due to the substantive input the community had already provided through past volunteer-led studies. The following additional outreach tools were used to complete pre-existing work:

- Two resident surveys were conducted from the spring through the early fall to gain an understanding of residents' concerns throughout the entire plan area. The first focused on quality of life issues; the second gauged people's sense of safety. Survey volunteers reached out to over 600 households and received a total of 400 completed surveys. The student survey volunteers felt welcomed by the community and found residents readily willing to share their concerns.

- Two focus groups and multiple private meetings were held with 20 select stakeholders to discuss residential development options for the Orinoka Civic House – a derelict, but structurally sound former factory building in the heart of the plan's area of opportunity. Stakeholders included elected officials, City-wide partners, residents, and local business owners. (The Orinoka Civic House forms part of the Orinoka Mills Complex, a large-scale development that will result in affordable rental housing, office space, business space, and publicly accessible green space.)
- Two public meetings were held in 2013 to which residents, neighborhood-based organizations, local community groups, elected officials, city-wide partners, local businesses, and members of the stakeholder committee were invited.

In January 2014, a public unveiling of the North of Lehigh Plan was held. When combined with the prior volunteer-led engagement efforts, over 250 people have participated in identifying the changes they want for the North of Lehigh plan area.



THE RESIDENT'S VISION

North of Lehigh is a community full of possibility, yet confronted with intimidating problems. It is a poster-child for the problems that face North Philadelphia but also an intimate community of residents who have rolled up their sleeves to tackle the challenges that impact their lives. This plan seeks to build upon the strengths of the community and calls for continued collaborative action to transform a neighborhood beset with vacancy to a community that, in the words of residents, will become a **“joyful”** and **“inviting” “green oasis”** that fosters **“innovation”** creating **“jobs”** and inspires the rest of Philadelphia to follow suit.

GOALS & STRATEGIES

From this vision, a number of recommendations were developed with residents to improve their community. These focus on the key areas of concern that residents have been working with NKCDC to address. These include: Public Safety; Housing; Vacant Land; Spurring Capital Investment North of Lehigh; Streets and Transportation; Community Cohesion; Economic Development / Environmental Justice and; Human Capital Investment. The following pages provide a summary of these strategies.



1. IMPROVE PUBLIC SAFETY & MITIGATE THE DRUG MARKET

The Kensington/Somerset intersection in North of Lehigh has been identified as the most notorious open-air drug market in the City of Philadelphia. Despite a noticeable decline in drug activity due to strong working partnership between the 24th Police District, SEPTA Transit Police, residents, SNBL, and NKCDC that has improved residents' sense of safety, the impact of the drug market is palpable. Addicts can still be found nodding off on residents' steps or shooting up as they walk down certain residential streets. Residents can point to the numerous vacant homes used as drug dens or for prostitution. Children are so accustomed to the activity that they have learned to ignore it on their walk to school or the corner bodega.

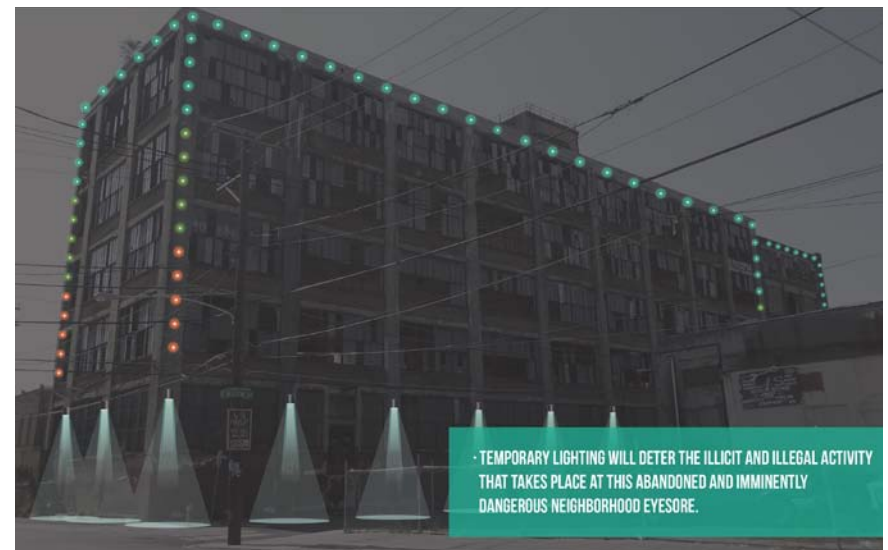
For the past three years, resident participation has revealed that the community has reached a saturation point. They have voiced time and time again their strong desire to reduce the drug activity and increase the safety of their neighborhood. They remain proud of their neighborhood and want to live alongside their children and parents. While recent resident-led initiatives have made a notable and measurable difference in crime, much more remains to be done. Residents emphasized the need to improve public safety and mitigate the drug market in the community. Strategies include:

- 1.1. Control access to the Lehigh Viaduct to reduce drug and criminal activity
- 1.2. Increase resident capacity to address blight and crime by continuing to work with police and monitor activity
- 1.3. Expand police presence throughout the neighborhood
- 1.4. Acquire free lighting for residents of target streets and improve alleyway lighting
- 1.5. Light up North of Lehigh to create safe passageways
- 1.6. Use camera surveillance to increase safety and decrease drug activity
- 1.7. Improve public health services available to the addicted and their families through partnerships with social service providers

FIGURE 2. INCREASED LIGHTING IN RESIDENTIAL AREAS



FIGURE 3. TEMPORARY LIGHTING INSTALLATION FOR THE FUTURE ORINOKA CIVIC HOUSE



2. STRATEGICALLY REHABILITATE HOUSING

Attractive and safe housing is an invaluable asset of a vibrant community. If the overall condition of a neighborhood's housing is excellent or good, this can encourage developers and home buyers to invest in the community. If a large portion of a neighborhood's housing stock is in serious disrepair or distressed, this has a deleterious impact: Investors will avoid the neighborhood because of the perceived lack of return on investment, leading to an escalating decline of resources that spurs the growth of criminal elements within the neglected area. North of Lehigh experienced this phenomenon of scarcity in full force during the mid-1980s when the last local manufacturing plant closed its doors. As companies moved their operations outside the neighborhood, housing fell into bad condition due to the limited resources available within the community. The upsurge of crime is a symptom of ongoing disinvestment. Therefore, finding ways to encourage investment is essential to improving the North of Lehigh plan area. Strategically rehabilitating housing throughout the neighborhood will not only help the owners build individual wealth through appreciating home values, it will also attract new investment and resources to the neighborhood. Strategies include:

FIGURE 4. VACANT LOT AND "GUERRILLA BEAUTIFICATION" METHODS



- 2.1. Increase homeownership retention and attract new homeowners
- 2.2. Link residents with home repair assistance programs
- 2.3. Improve code enforcement by working closely with L&I and targeting enforcement
- 2.4. Demolish dangerous vacant properties
- 2.5. Help residents gain ownership of privately-owned vacant structures through various acquisition pathways
- 2.6. Encourage a housing rehabilitation organization to expand to plan area
- 2.7. Establish a local talent pool to assist neighbors with minor housing improvements
- 2.8. Apply the Broken Windows Theory to privately-owned vacant housing
- 2.9. Build infill housing that includes both market-rate and affordable housing to foster a mixed-income and intergenerational community
- 2.10. Advocate for implementation of the City's Land Bank

3. REDUCE VACANT LAND AND IMPROVE THE COMMUNITY'S GREEN SPACE

Vacant land is one of the few blighting influences that can be quickly transformed into a value-adding community asset. With coordinated work, vacant lots can be converted into community gardens, playgrounds, and pocket parks. They can also be replaced with new housing or mixed-use commercial uses based on market potential. In most cases, the ability to radically improve the look and feel of a neighborhood block by repurposing its vacant lots is limitless.

According to the 2010 U.S. Census, 40% of the resident population is under the age of 19.¹ Nevertheless, North of Lehigh lacks the amount of open space necessary to meet the recreation needs of these young people and their families. Trenton Playground is the one play space situated within the study area and is in dire need of revitalization. The result is a community where current green spaces are not easily accessible to all North of Lehigh residents; and those that are need to be rehabilitated and maintained.

The future of vacant land and the ability to provide safe, green space for residents and children are linked in many ways. The community has already worked to clean up lots and install new plantings. This is the next phase in the evolution of the community toward a greener future. Strategies include:

- 3.1. Develop land use proposal for vacant land
- 3.2. Beautify strategically selected lots to stabilize spaces and engage residents
- 3.3. Maintain select lots as open spaces
- 3.4. Promote pathways for residents to gain ownership of publicly-owned vacant land next to their homes
- 3.5. Convert publicly-owned vacant lots to pocket parks / community green spaces
- 3.6. Improve existing playground space
- 3.7. Repurpose unused land along the Lehigh Viaduct
- 3.8. Create a new gateway entrance into the neighborhood
- 3.9. Support the development of pathways for residents to gain ownership of privately-owned vacant land

FIGURE 5. POCKET PARK/PARKETTE



FIGURE 6. TRENTON PLAYGROUND IMPROVEMENTS



4. SPUR CAPITAL INVESTMENT NORTH OF LEHIGH WITH THE ORINOKA MILLS COMPLEX DEVELOPMENT

North of Lehigh has experienced decades of disinvestment that is evident throughout the plan area. Vacant buildings and/or vacant lots are found on every one of the plan area's 188 blocks. The majority of the housing stock is in average condition, needing repairs so that it does not become seriously distressed. The drug market is still active, albeit to a lesser degree, along principal thoroughfares. And the unemployment rate is at a high of 19%, based on the 2007-2011 American Community Survey.² Spurring capital investment into North of Lehigh will not only require strategic actions in each of the issue areas identified in this plan, but also a large-scale and visible investment that can become a game-changer and attract private market development. Development of the Orinoka Mills Complex will be that game-changer.

NKCDC's development of the Orinoka Mills Complex will replicate its past success with adaptive re-use of vacant industrial structures. The development will consist of residential, commercial and community spaces (both indoor and outdoor). The residential component in the Orinoka Civic House will offer sustainable affordable housing and an indoor community space. The rear of the Orinoka Civic House, to be known as The Civic Green, will offer

an amphitheatre and recreation area available to Civic House residents and the community. The commercial spaces will consist of The Mill Space in the 3-story structure and NKCDC's new offices and a coffee shop in the Orinoka Civic House. Additional community space will be available through Orinoka Farms and Garden.

The Orinoka Mills Complex development is projected to cost \$16.2 million. This investment will have a resounding impact on North of Lehigh. It will spur additional capital investment, put eyes back on the street and reduce drug activity, bring new commercial activity and jobs, and improve the community's quality of life. For the nearby residents of The Village, this investment will stabilize the community and bolster the reduction in drug and criminal activity. Strategies include:

- 4.1. Develop the Orinoka Civic House and The Civic Green
- 4.2. Develop The Mill Space
- 4.3. Develop Orinoka Farms and Garden

FIGURE 7. RENDERING OF THE ORINOKA CIVIC HOUSE

Source: Jibe Design Architecture



FIGURE 8. DIAGRAM OF PROPOSED ORINOKA MILLS COMPLEX DEVELOPMENT



5. CALM THE TRAFFIC IN RESIDENTIAL AREAS AND IMPROVE LOCAL STREETS

Though its compact street grid makes the neighborhood walkable, North of Lehigh's street network can be difficult to navigate by car. Narrow residential streets, dead ends, and inadequate street markings can create stressful driving situations. Further, many residents complain about the fast-moving traffic through the community that threatens the safety of the area's large population of children. Calming traffic and improving streets can help to reduce crime and provide safer community spaces for children. Strategies include:

- 5.1. Slow traffic down on wide streets
- 5.2. Install better signage
- 5.3. Target street improvements to help reconnect Trenton Playground with the surrounding community
- 5.4. Promote walking, bicycling and transit use
- 5.5. Change the direction of some streets
- 5.6. Reconnect dead-end streets

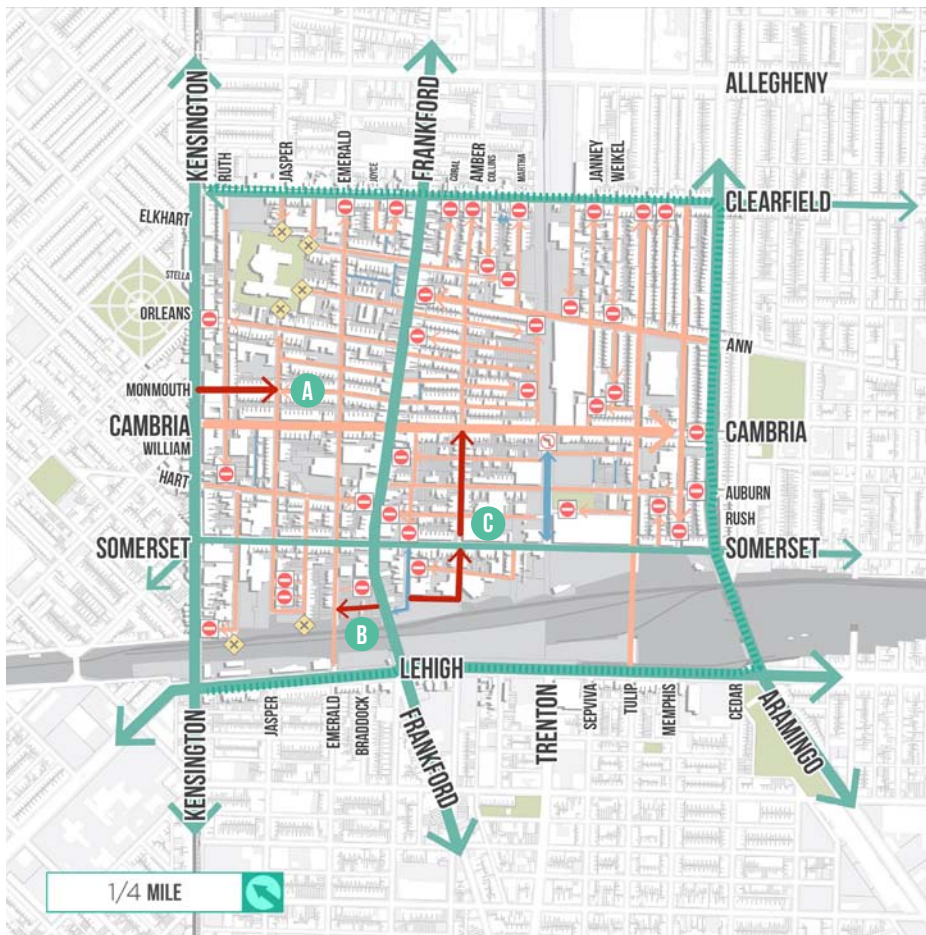
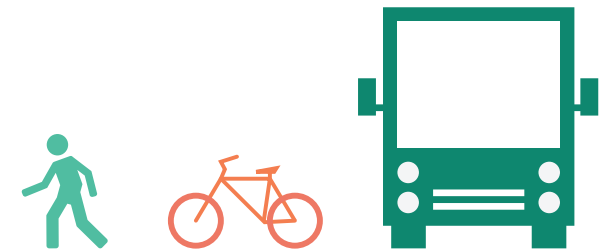


FIGURE 9. REVISED STREET NETWORK

- A: Monmouth Street
- B: Sterner Street
- C: Amber Street

FIGURE 10. DIVERSIFY MODES OF TRANSPORTATION



- DO NOT ENTER
- DEAD END
- NO LEFT TURN
- PROPOSED DIRECTION CHANGE
- ONE-WAY RESIDENTIAL
- TWO-WAY RESIDENTIAL
- ARTERIALS

SOURCE: GOOGLE MAPS

6. PROMOTE COMMUNITY COHESION AND CELEBRATE NEIGHBORHOOD DIVERSITY

One of the most attractive qualities of the North of Lehigh community is its diversity. In terms of racial/ethnic composition, approximately 46% of neighborhood residents in 2010 identified ethnically as *Hispanic*, 25% as *White*, 25% as *Black*, 2% as *Asian*, with the remaining 2% categorizing themselves as either *Multiracial* or *Other*.³ Providing opportunities to highlight the various cultures and traditions that exist in the neighborhood can strengthen bonds between neighbors and promote community pride and resilience. Strategies include:

- 6.1. Increase the leadership capacity and independence of Somerset Neighbors for Better Living civic association
- 6.2. Coordinate volunteers to improve the community
- 6.3. Assist CWEP with becoming a strong, safe, and secure community asset
- 6.4. Create positive communication avenues for the community
- 6.5. Organize a Community Multicultural Festival & Regular Dinner Events
- 6.6. Use murals and public art to enliven key connector streets
- 6.7. Connect youth with community activities and youth-related resources
- 6.8. Transform Lehigh Avenue into a connector street between northern and southern areas

FIGURE 11. IMPROVING CWEP'S PUBLIC SPACE

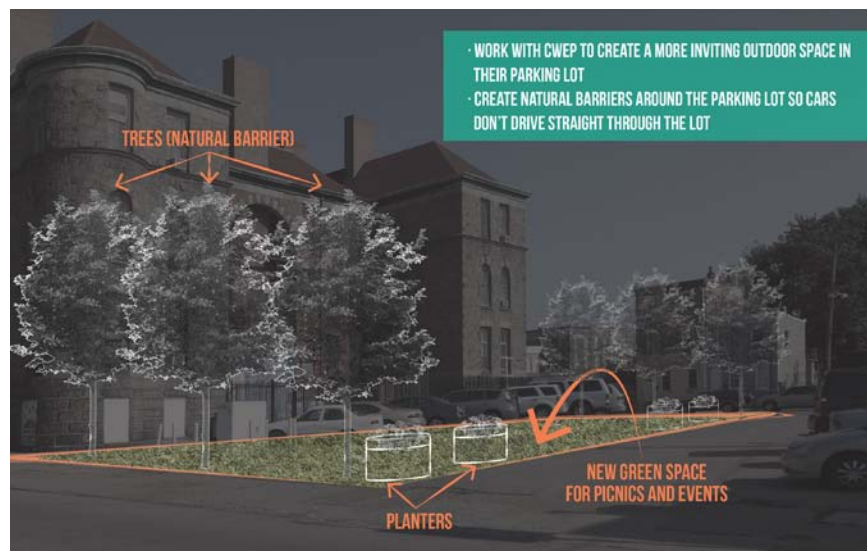
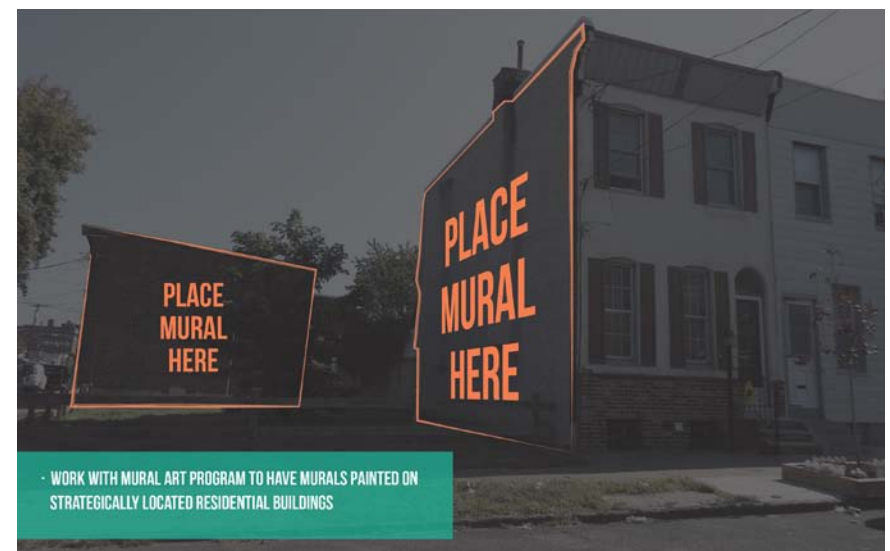


FIGURE 12. STRATEGICALLY APPLYING MURALS ON RESIDENTIAL BUILDINGS



7. REBUILD NORTH OF LEHIGH THROUGH ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Developing economic revitalization approaches with an environmental justice lens is necessary for North of Lehigh because of the area's industrial legacy and vast vacancies. The impact of deindustrialization is ever-present. Vacant or underutilized industrial buildings populate the landscape. Salvage yards and industrial storage lots blight the neighborhood and can negatively influence the health of residents living nearby. Today there are 22 acres of industrial land uses, of which 9 acres (41% of total industrial uses) consist of active scrapyards. Nevertheless, redeveloping industrial buildings as mixed-use properties like live/work spaces can attract entrepreneurs and business owners and spur investment. Collaborating with salvage yard owners to beautify or “green” their properties will enhance the pedestrian experience and mitigate health impacts for the neighborhood. In addition to industrial vestiges, there are 209 current commercial uses in North of Lehigh. Many of these enterprises provide services and goods that meet basic needs. However, there are opportunities to expand commercial options and job opportunities. The following strategies will help diversify and broaden the neighborhood's economic base:

- 7.1. Improve access to healthy food
- 7.2. Continue sustainability efforts like recycling and tree plantings
- 7.3. Address environmental hazards caused by scrapyards by monitoring activity and creating green buffers around these uses
- 7.4. Use Philadelphia's zoning processes to support improvements to North of Lehigh quality of life
- 7.5. Support the Kensington Avenue Commercial Corridor through a full-fledged commercial corridor management program
- 7.6. Clean commercial corridors
- 7.7. Undertake a commercial market study to determine the amount and type of commercial uses that can be supported in the community
- 7.8. Work with the Kensington and Allegheny Business Association
- 7.9. Activate the Kensington/Somerset intersection
- 7.10. Redevelop other unused industrial sites as mixed-use properties
- 7.11. Use public art to transform eyesores into assets

FIGURE 13. BEAUTIFYING PUBLIC REALM NEAR SALVAGE YARDS

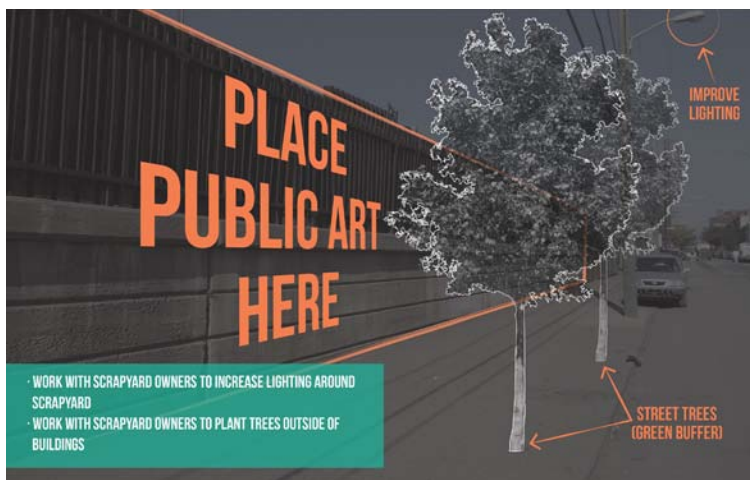
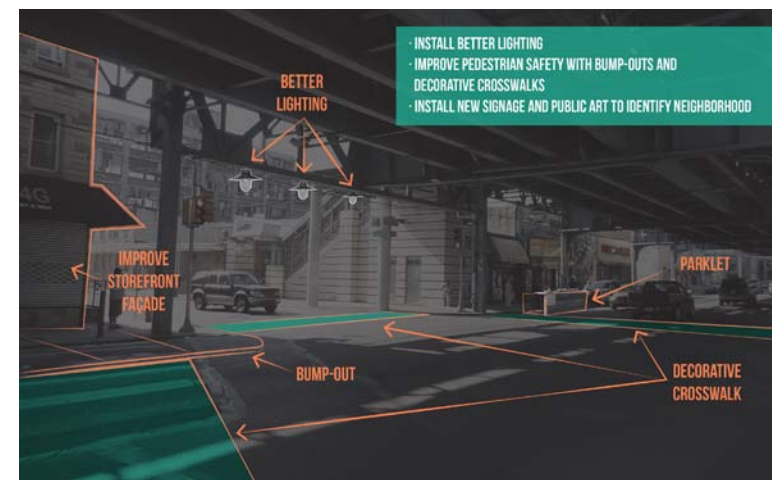


FIGURE 14. ACTIVATING KENSINGTON & SOMERSET INTERSECTION



8. INVEST IN HUMAN CAPITAL

North of Lehigh residents face significant challenges that are hard to overcome. To improve the lives of local residents, we need to come to terms with some of the difficult barriers that prevent them from moving up the economic ladder. To expand economic opportunities for residents, a multilayered approach is necessary: link residents to workforce skills training; attract established enterprises to the area that can provide employment; and actively support the brimming entrepreneurial spirit present in the neighborhood. Strategies include:

- 8.1. Increase access to job training and employment opportunities
- 8.2. Explore the possibility of a “green jobs” training center / business incubator
- 8.3. Link residents to entrepreneurship courses & technical assistance and provide flexible space for formal & informal business owners

- 8.4. Consider programs that combine job development and housing rehab

- 8.5. Explore the establishment of a North of Lehigh Community Development Financial Institution

ENDNOTES

1. U.S. Census Bureau. *2010 Census Summary File 1 – Pennsylvania Table P12: Age Breakdown*.
2. U.S. Census Bureau. *2007-2011 American Community Survey Table B23025: Employment Data*.
3. U.S. Census Bureau. *2010 Census Summary File 1 – Pennsylvania Table P9: Race & Origin (Hispanic) for Total Population*.



FIGURE 15. RENDERING OF FLEXIBLE MARKETPLACE ALONG KENSINGTON AVENUE