

## It's not just the Lydia Wright School

A mile or so away, the neighborhood around the Harvey Austin School—another successful Phase 1 renovation—hasn't fared much better. The school looks great, but it's a gem among the rubble of a neighborhood that has been on a long, downward slide. The surrounding streets remain among the most blighted and crime-ridden in Buffalo.

The neighborhood surrounding East Comprehensive School, also a Phase 1 renovation, is similarly blighted.

Some neighborhoods don't require much investment—North Park Elementary School, for example, also a Phase 1 renovation, is situated in a stable, prosperous community. But most of Buffalo's public schools, and a majority of those scheduled for renovations, are in neighborhoods that desperately need help.

From initial proposal to signed contract, the project coordinator, Ciminelli, promised to work with community groups, city government and private partners to facilitate improvement in the neighborhoods surrounding the schools targeted for renovations. From day one Ciminelli described joint schools reconstruction project as a "development" project, not merely a construction job.

While acknowledging that the first priority of the schools reconstruction project is educational facilities, Ciminelli's successful proposal posed this rhetorical question: "How can we, as the Ciminelli team, help our Schools and neighborhoods to address [children's] needs and enrich our community? *After all, aren't we just the building contractors?*"

The proposal goes on to provide answers to that question: Ciminelli can contribute to the revitalization of the neighborhoods surrounding targeted schools by helping to identify funding sources the city, community groups and housing agencies might use to invest in neighborhood infrastructure and housing stock; by encouraging its financial partner, Citibank, to facilitate low-interest loans for home purchases and improvements in designated neighborhoods; by coordinating with the city's Office of Strategic Planning so that demolitions and neighborhood improvements around the rehabbed schools might be scheduled at the same time that Ciminelli's subcontractors are working on-site, in order to achieve some efficiencies and maybe even shared bidding processes.

"There was an expectation that as we rebuilt the schools, we were going to rebuild the neighborhoods around them," Masten District Councilmember Antoine Thompson told *Artvoice*. The Masten District, home to some of the city's most blighted neighborhoods, comprises several schools targeted for reconstruction, including Lydia Wright. "And that has not happened."

Why not? And what can the city and the school district do to make sure that when construction season begins in a month or so and Ciminelli initiates Phase 2 of the project, we don't miss another huge opportunity to improve the neighborhoods which need attention most?

## And it's not just Ciminelli

Ciminelli has been in something of a defensive posture in recent months regarding its

performance in Phase 1. It has been faulted for downgrades in material quality, for being slow to respond to complaints about poor workmanship and for a backup in performing what it calls "add-ons" and what the Joint School Construction Board calls doing what should have been done in the first place according to the contracts. Ciminelli hasn't done any favors to its public image—always controversial to begin with—by crying poor, claiming that an unforeseeable rise in construction costs has made it nearly impossible to realize the full scope of the projects as envisioned when construction began 18 months ago.

All that makes it easy to look at the blighted neighborhood surrounding a school like Lydia Wright and say, "What happened to 'the Promise' that was the central theme of Ciminelli's initial proposal? 'The Promise to Our Children'? 'The Promise to Our Neighborhoods'?"

But it's not fair to lay all the blame at the feet of Ciminelli. The company pledged to facilitate neighborhood redevelopment, but strategic planning is the city's prerogative.

"First and foremost the goal of the project is to create 21st-century learning environments for the students," said Ciminelli spokesman Kevin Schuler. "You can never get away from that aspect of the project—that is our priority above all else: What are you doing with the schools themselves, how do you get the most bang for the buck out of the program?"

Beyond that, says Schuler, Ciminelli has committed its own money to fund at least one neighborhood revitalization program. He says that his company's primary investment in neighborhood revitalization thus far has taken the form of a \$500,000 commitment to fund the Buffalo Niagara Jobs Initiative, which is a pre-apprenticeship program designed to prepare untrained workers to join the trade unions' apprenticeship programs. Ciminelli is identifying derelict houses nearby the schools renovated during Phase 1, Schuler explained. The trade unions will use these houses as classrooms.

"So they're going to rehab these houses and put them back on market," Schuler said. "It's a twofer—on the one hand we're going to train people who aren't quite ready to enter the trades. Then the flip side is, when you're done you're going to have rehabbed houses ready to go to market—houses that otherwise would have been demolished."

"We all believe that housing is going to be the key to neighborhood redevelopment," Schuler added. "You've got a brand new school, now you need to convince families that they want to live nearby those schools. This is one way we're doing our part."

According to Schuler, the Buffalo Niagara Jobs Initiative acts as liaison with the city's numerous housing agencies. Ciminelli itself, he said, has reached out to the various community groups and block clubs representing the neighborhoods surrounding the schools—though the vast majority of block clubs and community groups from the neighborhoods around Phase 1 schools told *Artvoice* that they had never been consulted by Ciminelli and had never been asked for their input on how school renovations might be used to leverage improvements throughout the neighborhood.



The Woodlawn Row Houses are just 50 paces away from Buffalo Traditional School.

# HOME IMPROVEMENT

## The city-owned Woodlawn Row Houses are prime investment opportunities

For a city in dire need of a unique selling point, the Woodlawn Row houses on Woodlawn Avenue represent a perfect example of a fix-it-up opportunity for Buffalo, and a chance to help improve its image.

Built in 1894, the Woodlawn Houses are one of only three examples left in Buffalo of the row house design, a traditional form of urban architecture. Known for their sturdiness as well as the ability to blend seamlessly into city streetscapes, row houses are seen in many metropolitan cities all over the world.

The houses, located on 147-153 Woodlawn Avenue, are no secret. Or are they?

Granted "Local Landmark" status by the Buffalo Preservation Board in 1981 and owned by the City of Buffalo since 2002, the edifices have been victimized by deterioration, vandalism and more than a century of frigid Buffalo winters. Some local residents are surprised that the houses are, in fact, for sale.

This negligence is almost tragic, according to Clinton Brown, a local architect and preservation activist. Brown believes that the current state of maintenance is subpar, especially when one considers the architectural and historic significance of the houses:

"[The Woodlawn Row Houses] represent an important kind of housing that was attempted in Buffalo at all levels, whether at the elite level on Delaware, or as more affordable [housing] for growing families on the East side," said Brown.

It's not as if the city has no reason to upgrade the property. Several large-scale development plans are in the works for the Masten District, including the 110,000-square-foot Artspace project, slated for construction in the near future.

In addition, the Buffalo Traditional High School, located at 450 Masten Street, is a centerpiece of the \$1 billion schools reconstruction project, coordinated by LP Ciminelli. The school is scheduled for renovation and conversion into the Buffalo Academy for Visual and Performing Arts (BAVPA) in June.

The school is a mere 50 or so paces across the street from the decaying Woodlawn houses.

"In the Phase 1 [Ciminelli] projects, there have been a ton of dollars pumped into the community, but nothing is done in the area around the schools," said Dave Torke, local resident and site administrator for the Fix Buffalo Today for Tomorrow blog ([www.fixbuffalo.blogspot.com](http://www.fixbuffalo.blogspot.com)).

According to community activist Michele Johnson, while saving the Woodlawn houses should be a concern, she acknowledges the fact that the city may not have enough in its piggy bank to save them:

"I really would have a problem tearing them down, because there are so few row houses left. They are something of our past that we should try to preserve, even though [the city doesn't] have the money to preserve everything," said Johnson. "I do believe, however, that while there are some things we have to save, we have to be selective."

Why would anyone want to pony up the tens of thousands of dollars necessary to revamp the houses? According to Torke, who fixed up and now lives in a similar set of houses not far away on Woodlawn Avenue, the rewards can be immeasurable:

"It's important to adaptively reuse [these] buildings. It puts us in touch with our community, and there's something about reusable buildings that helps us make connections with the past," said Torke.

At this point, Drew Kelley, president of the BAVPA Parent Teacher Organization, would just like to see something get done:

"I'd like to see them get either fixed up or bulldozed, one way or the other, but they look like they have a lot of potential," said Kelley. "It's important that the neighborhoods don't look like war zones around the schools, that's for sure."

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