



above: East Comprehensive High School, located just north of Martin Luther King Park, was included in Phase 1 of the Joint Schools Construction project.

below: This abandoned house at 882 Northhanpton stands a block and a half away from East Comprehensive High School.



But communication is a two-way street. There is an ever increasing number of initiatives to improve infrastructure, housing and general quality of life on the East Side. Some are huge—the St. John Fruit Belt Community Development Corporation, led by St. John's Michael Chapman, for example, is working on a huge housing redevelopment project; another ambitious housing project is planned around the recent renovations of St. Stanislaus's church, school and community center in the Fillmore District.

Smaller, community-based initiatives are also proliferating—see the sidebars for a few examples—and the activism of City Housing Court Judge Henry Nowak is beginning to draw more attention to housing issues, too.

“Really what's lacking is a bigger plan to tie it all together,” Schuler said. “That's what needs to come out of the city's Office of Strategic Planning and the Board of Education.”

Antoine Thompson is pushing for a number of projects that surround schools in his district targeted for Phase 2 renovations. He's asking the city to demolish a nursing home near Bennett High School which burned down earlier this week. He hopes to secure funding to build new homes in the neighborhood surrounding Buffalo Traditional High School, which is slated to become the new performing arts magnet school. He has requested that the city resurface streets and sidewalks on Glenwood and Woodlawn, as well. All of this work would be paid for, he says, with a combination of federal block

grant money and the city's ordinary appropriations for such improvements.

“This is a great time, with the new mayor in place and a new construction season about to begin, to make sure that we make the necessary adjustments to restore the neighborhoods around those schools,” Thompson said, adding that the first step is to coordinate the various branches of city government and ensure that they are all adhering to a long-range master plan—the plan that Ciminelli's Kevin Schuler says the city seemed to lack during Phase 1.

Public Works Commissioner Joe Giambra recently told Thompson that it would cost \$70-100 million to rehab every street and sidewalk in the city. In other words, maybe \$10 million a year over the 10-year life of the schools reconstruction project. That may be too large a percentage of the city's yearly block grant allowance of \$20 million to direct toward one project—Buffalo has no shortage of dire needs—but surely in combination with the city's existing budget for street-level improvements, that's a reasonably attainable goal. That's the sort of comprehensive effort that would make a perfect complement to the schools reconstruction program.

“We have to take care of our internal processes first,” Thompson said. “We have to make sure our city government people are working together, that we're directing our resources internally in the proper way. That's first base. Then we can push Ciminelli to do their part.”

SALVAGING A DREAM

The city looks at recycling portions of abandoned homes

Every so often, a lone voice of reason is able to penetrate the levels of bureaucracy at City Hall, and the administration slowly embraces and tries to implement a clear-eyed solution to one of its problems. More often than not, if the solution involves an East Side problem, the lone voice belongs to activist Michele Johnson.

Her latest solution, borrowed from cities like Bridgeport, Connecticut and Baltimore, Maryland seems to fit Buffalo—particularly the East Side—like a glove. Johnson sees two things happening at the same time: On the one hand, there are sturdy houses being demolished across the city, valuable materials and all; on the other hand are low-income homeowners being written into housing court who can't afford the materials they need to make required repairs—as often as not the reason they ended up in court in the first place.

Why not salvage parts from houses that will be demolished, Johnson says, and give them to those homeowners who can prove a certain low level of income? The rest can be sold cheaply to homeowners making a little more money. The idea, known as architectural salvage or deconstruction, has worked elsewhere, so why not here?

There are well over 20,000 abandoned houses in the City of Buffalo, most of which are located on the East Side, and most of which the city plans to demolish somewhere down the road. Many of those houses were built in the early to mid 1900s with simple, high-quality craftsmanship. While it's true that most abandoned homes have been stripped of their copper piping, doors and hot water furnaces, there are still countless valuable parts and materials that can be salvaged—antique lighting fixtures, beautifully crafted railings and, most importantly, cord upon cord of sturdy lumber.

“It doesn't make any sense to throw all of that into a landfill,” Johnson wrote Artvoice in an e-mail. “What a waste!”

Johnson originally approached city housing court Judge Henry Nowak for help setting up a small program, probably a not-for-profit that could do a few deconstructions on a test basis and see what problems they encounter. Since then, however, Rev. Michael Chapman from St. John the Baptist Church and officials in Byron Brown's administration have caught wind of the project and are in the process of taking the lead on it. They are thinking on a much larger scale and are hoping to overhaul the city's entire beleaguered demolitions program. “It's gotten a lot bigger than I had originally envisioned,” Nowak said in a recent phone interview, “but I'm trying to keep the deconstruction aspect of it as significant as I can.”

There are still many hurdles for the administration, like obtaining affordable insurance, and calculating labor and backfill costs, but the chips are slowly falling into place. The project is taking longer to get off the ground than it would've in its original incarnation, but Nowak thinks it will ultimately be better for Buffalo. “It will be better in the end, because a complete overhaul means that more houses can be deconstructed rather than demolished.”

While these elements are currently falling into place, it just so happens that someone experienced with deconstruction, Michael Gainer, has recently moved into Buffalo and is offering up innovative ideas of his own on how to set up such a program. Gainer, a member of the Building Materials Reuse Association and himself a carpenter, moved here from Boston about six months ago. In Massachusetts he'd been involved with deconstruction of historic buildings, and he quickly saw the potential for a similar program in Buffalo, but on a much larger scale.

“When I got here, I realized that there was this issue in the city of all this housing stock that's deteriorating and is abandoned or vacant and is a community liability,” Gainer says. “I decided I'd like to figure out if it makes sense to encourage, or at least start talking about how we can implement, a larger-scale deconstruction project.” To that end, Gainer is contacting public officials to help build upon the current dialogue surrounding deconstruction. According to Gainer, one pilot program in Hartford, Connecticut deconstructed a house, and the cost, including insurance and labor, came to \$1 cheaper per square foot than the more common method of machine demolition. Gainer sees the potential for much more than a deconstruction program here. He sees entry-level job training programs, youth programs and programs to create small businesses that can resell the materials.

“It seems pretty tragic to me to just go in and bulldoze a neighborhood with very little respect to the process that went into building it, the people who lived there and the community that was built around those homes,” Gainer says. “I think that building a program around deconstruction, and around community involvement in that process, helps build communities even while their physical structures are disappearing.”

—peter koch