

# COMMUNITY BUILDERS

REBUILDING TOGETHER PITTSBURGH HAS MADE ITS MARK LOCALLY BY OFFERING NO-COST REPAIRS TO LOW-INCOME HOMEOWNERS. BUT THE ORGANIZATION ALSO SUPPORTS BROADER COMMUNITY REVITALIZATION THROUGH ITS IMPACT NEIGHBORHOODS PROGRAM, WHICH ALLOWS PLACES LIKE HAZELWOOD TO REAP COMMUNITY-WIDE BENEFITS. BY TAIJA PANDOLFI

Steve Hellner-Burris, executive director of Rebuilding Together Pittsburgh, is the man behind the plan that is enabling the home rehab nonprofit to help transform communities.

**F**or the executive director of Rebuilding Together Pittsburgh, a next-in-line service model wasn't enough if he wanted his housing nonprofit to help revitalize communities fighting to reverse economic decline.

"The impact of [renovation] work, while significant for an individual person, is not necessarily significant for the community as a whole," said Steve Hellner-Burris. So, he developed an initiative called Comprehensive Impact Neighborhoods, where crews focus on several projects in one area to increase the overall benefit for a community.

The difference that this deep-dive approach is making has caught the attention of both local officials and the residents who are watching their communities transform.

On a sunny July afternoon last summer, Allegheny County Chief Executive Rich Fitzgerald visited Pittsburgh's Hazelwood neighborhood to see the completion of four home-construction projects on Trowbridge Street—a steep, brick-covered hill with a clear view across the Monongahela River into the city's tree-lined South Side slopes. With sleeves rolled up for relief from the heat, one hand on a microphone and the other gesturing in the air to emphasize every other word, Mr. Fitzgerald was in his element as he thanked the nearly 40 people at the work site.

"Just look at this," he said, as he raved about the attractiveness of the neighborhood. "This right here is emblematic of Pittsburgh."

Standing among construction debris and groups of volunteers in bright blue t-shirts, Mr. Fitzgerald was flanked by James O'Connor, Pittsburgh platoon leader for The Mission Continues, a national veterans service organization, and the Rev. Tim Smith, executive director of Center of Life, a local nonprofit focused on advancing arts, health and education for children and families. The major volunteer effort organized by Rebuilding Together had brought together volunteers from The Mission Continues, Highmark Blue Cross Blue Shield and The Heinz Endowments along with performers from Center of Life's arts program.

"This is the ultimate community project," Mr. Fitzgerald said.

Like the national Rebuilding Together organization, the Pittsburgh affiliate receives philanthropic support from a variety of groups, including the Endowments, PNC Bank Foundation and Duquesne Light Co. This funding enables it to provide low-income homeowners with free maintenance and improvements, ranging from building new stairs to patching the roof.

Traditionally, Rebuilding Together simply answered the needs of whichever homeowner in the region was next on the list, often moving from neighborhood to neighborhood in the course of a month. When Mr. Hellner-Burris began to recognize that the success of individual projects failed to combat systemic issues in a community, he created Impact Neighborhoods in 2010, which extended work time in some areas to spread the benefit to more residents, even if they did not personally receive home improvements.

One reason this is possible is that Rebuilding Together's labor force is a mix of staff, volunteers, the occasional independent plumber or electrician, and a "work-experience" crew. The work-experience group consists of local residents with an interest in developing

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skills that could translate into a steady income. Since many projects require multiple days of work that cannot be completed solely by occasional volunteer groups, the work-experience crew allows the organization to spend many days each week in a community so that improvements are completed with consistency.

#### **Hazelwood's Impact Neighborhoods story**

This approach has been applied in municipalities such as Penn Hills and Wilkinsburg as well as in Pittsburgh neighborhoods such as Hazelwood and Larimer. The organization's work in Hazelwood, in particular, exemplifies the broader effect of this strategy. Rebuilding Together is in the middle of its fourth year in the community, where it has completed nearly 110 projects. Impact Neighborhoods keeps a crew in Hazelwood every week, which enables the community to

readily see across-the-board improvements and appreciate the value that these projects bring to the area.

The nonprofit also works closely with the Hazelwood Initiative, a community development organization, to assess the needs of that neighborhood. In order to qualify, homeowners must be below 200 percent of the federal poverty line, and not behind on their taxes or enrolled in a payment plan.

“Most of our clients are older, and they have a deep sense of pride in their homes,” said Josh Nard, project manager for Rebuilding Together’s Hazelwood work. “The majority of them are lifelong Hazelwood residents.”

As a neighborhood battered economically by the decline of Pittsburgh’s steel industry, Hazelwood has become the focus of many aspirations and predictions. It also is evolving as a model of how a combination of sustainable development strategies can be used to transform a community.

Along Hazelwood’s riverfront, a 178-acre brownfield that was once the home of the LTV coke works is undergoing a redesign that will include green infrastructure and energy-efficient residential, office and light-manufacturing construction. Also planned is a multi-modal trail that will link other communities to the site, which is sometimes called Almono, in reference to the three rivers that wind through the Pittsburgh region: the Allegheny, Monongahela and Ohio.

Retail development and property upgrades are underway in Hazelwood’s central business district along Second Avenue. One example of the possibilities for these efforts has been how, with Endowments support, the nonprofit ACTION-Housing converted a vacant church building into a combination library and community center that meets Passive House requirements, among the most stringent energy-efficiency standards in the world.

Rebuilding Together has been charged with helping to improve and preserve the neighborhood’s existing housing stock. Given the expected economic impact of Almono and other developments, the organization aims to position residents so that market increases do not price them out of the neighborhood while allowing them to capitalize on the rising value of their homes. The strategy is meant not only to provide safety and peace of mind to those living there now, but also to prepare them for the coming market shift.

David Brewton, a business and housing consultant who works with the Hazelwood Initiative, explained that Rebuilding Together’s efforts are essential to preventing expected development from isolating the older, established sections of the neighborhood, as was seen in nearby Homestead Borough when the Waterfront retail, entertainment and residential complex was built. That development was constructed on a former steel mill site along a riverfront in the early 2000s, and many have argued that the lack of a broad plan to

consider community needs and interests left the rest of the borough abandoned. Promises that the site would bring investment and value to Homestead failed to deliver, making the development an example of miscalculated planning.

Mr. Brewton sees the Waterfront as a warning and a lesson. When a significant portion of residents is positioned to realize equity in their homes, he said, the neighborhood will retain its indigenous population. “[Rebuilding Together is] investing in homes that will be worth more tomorrow than they are today,” he asserted.

The nonprofit also has a small “rehab for resale” program in Hazelwood in which older houses are renovated so they can be sold, preferably to current residents of the neighborhood. This strategy was developed in coordination with the Hazelwood Initiative and NeighborWorks, a national nonprofit that supports homeownership. The program is designed to increase residents’ ability to buy property in the community.

Rob Stephany, director of the Endowments’ Community & Economic Development Program, described additional, less measurable effects when homes are well-maintained. “I believe wholeheartedly in visible investment,” he said. “When people care about their space, the benefits spread. It’s as viral as when a vacant house spreads blight.”

Such potential was seen during a Rebuilding Together project at the home of longtime resident Louise Seaman. Beside the railroad tracks that separate Hazelwood’s “flats” from the rest of the neighborhood, a work-experience crew crowded into the limited available shade to observe Mrs. Seaman’s reaction to their upgrades on the house that her late husband, an LTV coke factory employee, once helped remodel. The crew had given her back porch a fresh coat of paint, installed new outdoor carpet, and poured a new cement walkway connecting the porch to the driveway, replacing a wobbly brick path she used to trip over.

“The neighbor’s going to need to have hers done,” Mrs. Seaman said, stepping proudly onto the new carpet. “It looks like I’m rich.”

While pride in one’s home and neighborhood is an essential element of a higher standard of living, Mr. Brewton explained, the long-term tangible benefits are the most compelling aspect of Rebuilding Together’s housing strategy. For a community whose population and business loss are not-too-distant memories, these projects offer security and economic flexibility that Hazelwood hasn’t seen since the decline of the local steel industry.

“[These homeowners] are going to have something. They are going to own their homes, and the homes are going to be in good condition,” Mr. Brewton said. “You could say it’s the anti-gentrification strategy for Hazelwood.” **h**