

Sculptor and mosaic artist James Simon, a longtime resident of Uptown, created the 25-foot-tall glass and tile Uptown welcome sign.



Scott Goldsmith

# Uptown aspirations

LEARNING HOW TO COMBINE INNOVATIVE AND INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT IN THE SAME PLACE  
BY JEFFERY FRASER

If there is a Pittsburgh neighborhood hiding in plain sight, it is Uptown.

It rests between Oakland and Downtown and is also known as the Bluff, Soho or simply part of the Hill District, depending on who is doing the talking. Chances are, most people who live in the city have been there, passing through without stopping as 39,000 motorists do every day on the Boulevard of the Allies alone.

Some 1,400 people call the often-overlooked neighborhood home, not counting students and inmates at the Allegheny County Jail. And for the past few years, these residents had a hand in reinventing it in ways that are attracting national attention.

Uptown is the city's first attempt to create a sustainable, people-friendly eco-innovation district. It combines bottom-up planning focused on social equity and the well-being of those living in the community with strategies and infrastructure to attract companies, innovation and jobs.

While eco-innovation districts typically target well-capitalized, single-site, former industrial or commercial property, the Uptown plan is applying the concept to an existing urban neighborhood with residents, businesses and its own character. That makes Pittsburgh's plan exceptionally challenging.

Also, half of the strategy is focused on community empowerment, self-determination, wealth-building, preservation of assets and affordability while improving environmental conditions, explained Christine Mondor, chairperson of the City Planning Commission and principal at the architectural firm, evolveEA. "That's acknowledging this is a community. It's not a blank slate. Our strategy is different from others."

The initiative has gained momentum since city officials put it in motion four years ago. UPMC Mercy Hospital, a neighborhood anchor, recently announced a \$400 million expansion plan that includes a new eye hospital and a nonbinding agreement calling for

training and job opportunities for local residents. The Port Authority of Allegheny County has plotted bus lanes and designed stations for a rapid-transit bus system that is expected to help thin car traffic and pollution.

And Uptown residents endorsed an eco-innovation district master plan that reflects their desires and concerns—a plan they helped shape through a two-year engagement process that saw 550 of them participate in planning events and 700 complete surveys. The process also included 50 interviews and more than 25 focus groups with community stakeholders.

"It gave residents, business owners, nonprofits and institutions a chance to envision what Uptown could be and express what they hope it will be," said Joseph Wingenfeld, program manager for Uptown Partners of Pittsburgh, a local community group. "Changes are being proposed, and they should be a part of that change. There's a lot of energy in this neighborhood."

The blueprint includes dozens of projects large and small, some more challenging than others.

Lanes for car traffic, for example, will be pared in favor of bus lanes and infrastructure that encourages biking and walking, enhances pedestrian safety, and curbs pollution. In Uptown, the rate of people killed or severely injured in car crashes and the concentration of black carbon in the air are among the highest in the city. Other strategies include reviving the commercial corridor and attracting new retail tenants and innovation companies. A civic plaza is also on the list, as are better stormwater management and more parks and green space, which Uptown's 37 percent rate of vacant and underused land suggests can be accommodated.

The benefits of such improvements won't likely be exclusive to Uptown.

As a natural extension of the university-rich corridor through Oakland, a revitalized Uptown will be a welcomed complement to the neighboring community, which is driving the city's emerging

innovation economy. Half of U.S. science, technology, engineering and mathematics jobs in that sector don't require a four-year degree and pay \$53,000 on average, according to a Brookings Institute study.

"As [Uptown] gets built out and becomes economically healthy, it's going to present new opportunities to the Hill District," Ms. Mondor added.

But the link between the eco-innovation district and greater Hill District could be better, said Marimba Milliones, president and CEO of the Hill Community Development Corporation. "The approach to development doesn't fully consider Uptown as part of the Hill District. It focuses on connecting Downtown to West Oakland, not fortifying the north-south connections with the Hill. I think that's an oversight."

The risk of gentrification accompanies initiatives that hope to raise the value of neighborhoods such as Uptown. As real estate values rise, so do housing costs, and the neighborhood is already seeing evidence of that, Mr. Wingenfeld said.

Many Uptown residents are particularly vulnerable to rising housing costs. According to Uptown Partners data, 21 percent of housing units are subsidized affordable housing and all are rentals. Many other residents live in units that are "naturally" affordable due to their condition and other factors.

"For us, the challenge is finding ways to make sure that long-term residents of Uptown can stay if they want to and not get pushed out," said Andrew McElwaine, vice president of Sustainability at The Heinz Endowments.

Uptown Partners recently hired a community engagement and outreach staff member, with support from the Endowments, to ensure that the voices, interests and concerns of residents remain in the forefront as projects in the master plan are rolled out.

And the city is offering developers incentives, such as relaxed density restrictions, to add affordable housing to their new market-rate developments. Other strategies for addressing housing affordability, such as establishing a land trust, are also being explored.

Whether the Uptown Eco-Innovation District becomes a national model will depend on how successful it is in overcoming the neighborhood's solvable physical challenges in a way that allows residents to share the benefits of new prosperity, Ms. Mondor said.

"Pittsburgh is at a great point," she asserted. "We are growing at a pace that we can see things emerging fast enough to influence them, and we are learning from other cities that are growing faster." **h**