An overflow crowd anxiously waits outside a Pittsburgh Planning Commission meeting to learn whether the panel will approve a master plan for a new hockey arena in the city’s Hill District. The plan was passed after the meeting last January, despite objections from residents seeking a contract for how the development would benefit the neighborhood.
BATTLE

MOSTLY BLACK HILL DISTRICT, BULLDOZERS UPEND A VIBRANT NEIGHBORHOOD AND DISPLACED THOUSANDS. TO FORGE A NOVEL AGREEMENT AND RECLAIM PRECIOUS GROUND. BY JEFFERY FRASER
Hope had been building in the beleaguered neighborhood for months. In 2007, thousands of volunteer hours were spent organizing and canvassing. There were heated debates over the issues. And very public negotiations began with the city, county and Pittsburgh Penguins over a contract to ensure that jobs and other benefits would flow to the Hill District from construction of a $321 million hockey arena, financed largely with public funds, along with a hotel and other development.

Now, out of the blue, came this unilateral agreement from the city and county — released through the news media — that was neither a product of those negotiations nor the legally binding contract neighborhood leaders had sought from the outset. “I don’t anticipate any significant adjustments,” Mayor Luke Ravenstahl had told reporters. “The proposal we put forth was a fair one.”

But on that January evening, with television cameras rolling, lifelong Hill District resident Brenda Tate held up a copy of the city and county’s offer and asked: “Anybody got a match?” Someone put a lighter to the three-page document, and it went up in flames.

“We’re standing here collectively as a community to say that what was put on the table is unacceptable,” said Evan Frazier, the Hill House Association’s executive director and chief negotiator for the One Hill Community Benefits Agreement (CBA) Coalition, which represented the Hill District at the bargaining table. At that moment, it became clear that nothing short of a legal contract spelling out negotiated benefits and giving residents a voice in shaping the future of their neighborhood would prevent community opposition to the arena and help mend lingering wounds inflicted by a failed urban renewal project some 50 years earlier.

“That was a turning point,” says Gabe Morgan, a veteran Service Employees International Union negotiator and co-chairman of the nonprofit Pittsburgh UNITED, an alliance of union, community and political groups that was part of the Hill District bargaining team. “The community’s reaction convinced everyone at the table that this was just going to have to get done.”

Eight months later, the city, county, Penguins and One Hill CBA Coalition signed a legally binding community benefits agreement — the first of its kind successfully negotiated in Pennsylvania. It includes funds to establish a job center, money to attract a grocery store to the neighborhood and other benefits related to the development of a new arena and an adjacent 28-acre tract of land. The deal also enables the coalition and neighborhood elected officials to participate in drafting a master development plan for the Hill District.

Jeff Fraser is a Pittsburgh-based freelance writer and frequent contributor to h. His last article, published in the Fall issue, was about the new education-and-research center that Pittsburgh’s Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens is constructing to be a “living building,” the pinnacle of green design.
Reporters had gathered at the
cold evening to hear what Hill District
thought of an unexpected offer
attach certain community benefits
to get a response tailor-made for the cameras.  

But perhaps most important, the agreement reveals how a community found the will and a way to begin healing the wounds from evictions and bulldozers five decades earlier. By rejecting a politically expedient deal, neighborhood leaders gained a document that has the power to breathe new energy into the Hill District and offers promise for its future.

By measure of endurance alone, arriving at a settlement was an achievement. The difficult negotiations took nearly a year to complete, and everyone involved faced challenges. It required government officials and the developer to shed traditional top-down tactics and accommodate the community will, championed by the One Hill CBA Coalition, an amalgam of some 100 Hill District organizations, unions and other supporters. It required Hill District leaders to navigate neighborhood politics, build a coalition, galvanize support, draft a bargaining platform and speak with one voice during the negotiations.

It meant a group of local foundations had to avoid influencing, as much as possible, such sensitive issues as community representation, bargaining goals and negotiations outcomes—even though they had introduced the benefits agreement concept to the region and their grants helped provide the community with legal and other technical support. Led by the Falk Foundation, the collaboration included The Heinz Endowments, The Pittsburgh Foundation, POISE, and the Women and Girls Foundation of Southwest Pennsylvania, and marked one of the nation’s first local philanthropic efforts connected with such agreements.

“From our point of view, it was very important to be supportive, but not directive,” says Endowments President Bobby Vagt. “I think that is an absolutely critical distinction.”

And it was a challenging line to draw given that several Endowments staff members had personal ties to the neighborhood.

One of the Hill-connected staffers, Bomani Howze, who works in the Innovation Economy section, draws on family history in describing the significance of the benefits contract. “The Hill was politically and economically disenfranchised under segregation when my grandparents and parents were forcibly removed from the 28-acre site,” he says. “Today the community is striving to leverage its political representation and grassroots organizing to translate into community revitalization.”

For all parties, successfully negotiating the community benefits agreement required overcoming the weight of history. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, much of the Lower Hill District was demolished to make way for new cultural amenities, including a municipal arena with a retractable dome. The late Mayor David L. Lawrence’s grand vision of a cultural center on the hill overlooking downtown was abandoned after the 1962 opening of the arena, known today as Mellon Arena—but not before some 100 acres of houses and businesses were razed and 8,000 residents displaced. The neighborhood’s business core was left crippled. Population fell steadily and steeply. Crime and widespread poverty emerged as inexorable problems.
Researchers have found that the destruction of large established neighborhoods inflicts psychological wounds much like the traumatic stress response seen among victims of hurricanes, tornadoes and floods. For individuals, the loss of a neighborhood can be disorienting and disruptive to their senses of attachment and identity. For a community, social disruption, including an increase in violence, is often seen when such severe stress is coupled with inadequate resources for managing it.

“It doesn’t just tear the social fabric. It destroys it,” says Columbia University psychiatry professor Mindy Fullilove, who has studied the impact of urban renewal on neighborhoods, including the Hill. She writes about the consequences in her book “Root Shock: How Tearing Up City Neighborhoods Hurts America, and What We Can Do About It.”

A community benefits agreement is an emerging strategy that attempts to prevent such devastation. It is a legally binding contract that developers, government officials and coalitions of neighborhood organizations negotiate to ensure that communities share in the benefits of major development projects, particularly those that receive significant public subsidies. These contracts give residents a voice in shaping projects in their neighborhoods and provide a way to enforce benefits negotiated to address certain neighborhood needs. In return, developers faithful to the agreement get assurances that the community won’t stand in the way of the permits and other government approvals necessary for a project to move forward.

These agreements are relatively young. The first was struck in 2001 and involved a coalition of Los Angeles community organizations and unions and a developer who received $150 million in public subsidies to help build a sports and entertainment district adjacent to the downtown Staples Center sports arena. Benefits won by community negotiators included an agreement to give low-income residents first consideration for jobs created by the project, a developer commitment of seed money for affordable housing and $1 million from the developer to provide community park and recreation amenities. The deal was the genesis of a national movement, which has since led to agreements in places such as San Diego, Denver, New York and Chicago.

In Pittsburgh, the first written demands for community benefits from the arena development were presented to city and county officials in April 2007 by a group of about 20 Hill District ministers and business leaders led by Marimba Milliones, a community leader and businesswoman, and the Rev. Johnnie Monroe, pastor of Grace Memorial Presbyterian Church.

The benefits they sought included a $10 million development fund to be paid up front, annual contributions thereafter, a share of the arena revenues and a pledge to hire minority workers to fill 30 percent of the jobs created by the arena and nearby development. Their stand drew widespread news coverage as did disagreement among political factions, which surfaced immediately. Tonya Payne, the Hill District’s city councilwoman, characterized the group’s approach as smacking of entitlement and criticized them for presenting demands that were not the result of neighborhood-wide meetings or other means of polling the broader community.

Meanwhile, officials of a prominent neighborhood coalition, the Hill District Consensus Group, were talking with the fledgling Pittsburgh UNITED about the possibility of negotiating a community benefits agreement that would be attached to the arena development. The One Hill CBA Coalition was soon organized around that idea, gaining the support of Pittsburgh UNITED and access to funding from the Fulfilling the Dream Fund, which was established in 2004 with $10 million from the Ford Foundation. By matching support from local philanthropies, the national initiative defends, supports and expands affirmative action and other efforts to promote racial and gender inclusion.
**1930s and 1940s**
The Hill District thrives during this period. It pulses with round-the-clock activity and is one of the most influential Black neighborhoods in the country. It is world-renowned for its music. Nearly every great jazz musician plays at the Crawford Grill, the historic jazz club on Wylie Avenue.

**1950 – 1955**
Pittsburgh receives more than $32 million in federal funds and $1 million from the state for urban renewal in the Hill District as part of the Pittsburgh Renaissance. Original plans call for the construction of theaters, retail stores, luxury apartments, a new symphony hall and a municipal arena with a retractable dome roof.

**1956 – 1961**
Hill District redevelopment displaces 416 businesses and more than 8,000 people. In 1960, residents opposing further urban renewal in the neighborhood erect a billboard at the corner of Centre Avenue and Crawford Street that says, “No redevelopment beyond this point!” Forty-one years later, a monument is erected on that spot to commemorate their stand. In 1961, the Civic Arena, now known as the Mellon Arena, is dedicated. It would be the only significant structure from the original cultural center plans to be built.

**1963 – 1968**
Reflecting the civil rights movement that is sweeping the country, more than 2,000 people march in August 1963 from the Hill District to downtown for job opportunities at Duquesne Light. Other protests follow, including marches against discrimination at Mine Safety Appliances, local department stores, the Pittsburgh Board of Education and the University of Pittsburgh. In 1968, riots in the Hill begin on April 5, the day after the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is slain, and last until April 12. In that week, 505 fires lead to $620,000 in property damage, one death and 926 arrests.

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**1960s**
Playwright and Hill District native August Wilson begins to garner national acclaim for his plays, particularly “Fences” and “The Piano Lesson,” which receive the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1987 and 1990, respectively. The two plays are part of a set of 10, collectively called the “Pittsburgh Cycle,” that chronicle the African American experience in the 20th century. Nine of these plays, including “Fences” and “The Piano Lesson,” are set in the Hill District, bringing attention to the cultural legacy and socioeconomic struggles of the community.

**1972**
The current Hill House building is completed. Designed by African American architect Walter Roberts, the Hill House is the home of the Hill House Association, which was founded in 1964 and provides social services to the community.

**1970s**
Jewish immigrants begin to replace the original settlers on the Hill. Following them are Italians, Syrians, Greeks and Poles. African Americans begin arriving from the South between 1880 and 1890, drawn by the promise of relief from southern segregation laws.

**1980s**
In August 2007, One Hill CBA Coalition, a group representing more than 100 Hill District community organizations and other supporters, begins meeting with city, county and Pittsburgh Penguins officials to negotiate a community benefits agreement for the new hockey arena development in the neighborhood. A year later, representatives from all parties sign an agreement at the historic Freedom Corner at Centre Avenue and Crawford Street in the Hill District.

**1993**
The first phase of Crawford Square is completed. The mixed-income, residential development sits on 17.5 acres in the Lower Hill District. As the development coordinator for the project, McCormack Baron had formed a joint venture with the Hill Community Development Corp., the Hill Project Area Committee, and the Pittsburgh Urban Redevelopment Authority.

**2007 – 2008**
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or Ken Nesbit, the 1950s Lower Hill District of his childhood was a melting pot of race and ethnic origin where families crowded into substandard housing were bonded by the hardships of the poverty they shared. “Nobody had anything,” Nesbit, now 60, remembers. “Everyone was the same. It was like an extended family. Other parents treated you like your parents. If you ran out of food or needed a place to stay, someone looked out for you.”

Pittsburgh Mayor David L. Lawrence saw the poverty as well — and something young Ken Nesbit couldn’t envision. To the powerful mayor, the Lower Hill was prime real estate, a place where a city cultural district would rise from the slums as part of the Pittsburgh Renaissance, the city’s first period of urban renewal begun after World War II.

That renaissance vision transformed the downtown core. Point State Park replaced a grimy warehouse district. New office development enhanced the city as a corporate headquarters. Air quality policies started to change the image of Pittsburgh as the “Smoky City.” In the Lower Hill, the architects of the renaissance drew up plans for a $100 million cultural district that included a new symphony hall, an art museum and luxury apartments. It would be anchored by a municipal arena and financed with public and private dollars. The Howard Heinz Endowment, an early contributor, helped pay for the study and planning of the symphony hall.

At first, Lower Hill residents expressed little opposition. That soon changed.

The bottom 100 acres of the Hill District were razed between 1956 and 1961, uprooting more than 400 businesses and 8,000 residents, including 1,550 families, Nesbit’s among them. The removal of those living there outpaced the construction of low-cost housing for all who needed it. Two-thirds of those displaced were African American. The shortage of low-cost housing for the city’s Black population became a crisis. By 1960, Pittsburgh ranked the worst among the 14 largest U.S. cities in the percentage of housing units occupied by non-whites that were classified as deteriorating or dilapidated dwellings.

“When they built the arena, they weren’t concerned about where they put people. They just scattered them,” Nesbit recalls. “It was like your life was in someone else’s hands.”

City officials considered extending the cultural district project into the Upper Hill neighborhood, but protestors drew their line in the sand at the corner of Centre Avenue and Crawford Street, erecting a billboard in 1960 that declared, “No redevelopment beyond this point!” In 1962, the arena opened. But soon afterward, rising community activism, organized opposition to urban renewal and the growing civil rights movement led public officials to lean toward the idea of improving “blighted” neighborhoods rather than razing homes and businesses and relocating residents — but little progress was made in ensuing years.

For decades, Pittsburgh’s largest Black neighborhood had been known for its vibrant cultural life that included jazz clubs like the Crawford Grill, Hurricane Lounge and Savoy Ballroom — essential stops along the national jazz circuit. Much of that commercial and social center was now gone. The out-migration of Jews, Italians and other non-African American residents intensified, bleeding diversity from a neighborhood once known for it. Crime and poverty worsened. Damage from riots that erupted in the wake of the 1968 assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. left additional scars.

In 1971, the renovated Heinz Hall opened downtown as the new home of the Pittsburgh Symphony, and the Lower Hill as the site of a cultural center was abandoned in favor of the city’s core. Only the arena blossomed from those original plans.

The neighborhood population continued to fall so that by 1990 there were only 15,000 Hill District residents, a steep drop from more than 50,000 in 1950.

Some 50 years after construction of the first arena, when city, county and Pittsburgh Penguins officials announced plans for a new home for the hockey team, they could not divorce the development from that painful chapter in Hill District history.
“Two important things got us involved with the community benefits agreement,” says Carl Redwood, One Hill CBA Coalition chairman and convener of the Hill District Consensus Group, a coalition organized nearly two decades ago. “We feel developers who come to our community need to be responsible and responsive to the people here. Second, developers who receive public subsidies must give back to the community. That money is not a gift. It’s an investment and it’s supposed to help. We need to know how it’s going to help and get that in writing.”

The emergence of the One Hill CBA Coalition meant two neighborhood groups were now seeking to negotiate on behalf of the Hill District. Over the summer of 2007, the One Hill CBA Coalition gathered strength by investing upwards of 7,000 volunteer hours to build a negotiating platform informed by citizen input solicited through a series of public meetings and door-to-door canvassing. By early September 2007, the One Hill CBA Coalition became the recognized negotiator for the Hill District when its nine-member bargaining team sat down with city, county and Penguins officials to begin formal talks over its set of demands, the “Blueprint for a Livable Hill.”

The months of internal struggle to determine community representation challenged foundation officials to understand the neighborhood political terrain, with which they had little experience. “It was complicated, and the process initially was rushed due to the Penguins’ construction schedule,” says Mary Navarro, senior program officer for Arts & Culture at the Endowments and chair of an internal team working to support revitalization efforts in downtown Pittsburgh and adjacent communities. “We needed to try and understand the issues involved. The voice of the Hill community needed to be heard. In this politically charged and fast-moving situation, it was better to sit back and provide the appropriate support so the community could come together and decide what it wanted out of an agreement.”

Once at the bargaining table, the availability of technical support provided through the local foundations-funded Dream Fund proved particularly helpful, says Morgan, the Pittsburgh UNITED co-chairman who had negotiated some 100 labor contracts as a Service Employees International Union official. “Look, the other side had several different layers of attorneys. But because of those resources, so did we. That’s invaluable because if you’ve never gone through a negotiating process before, it could become a mess. Or worse, it could become nothing at all, particularly when you’re sitting across from people who do negotiations for a living.”

The Penguins, for their part, publicly recognized the legacy of failed urban renewal in the Hill and expressed a readiness to negotiate a deal that would prevent history from repeating itself. “There’s a great opportunity here for the city and the region,” Tom McMillan, the Penguins spokesman, told reporters a few days before the first bargaining session. “The arena can be an economic generator, more than just a hockey arena. We acknowledge that what happened here 50 years ago was a travesty.”

The talks, however, still traveled a crooked road. There were the continued attempts by a group of Hill District ministers to negotiate separately from the One Hill CBA Coalition. There were the pickets outside Mellon Arena. There was the media-highlighted burning of the city and county’s proposal that was not the negotiated contract Hill District leaders sought.

Adding to the tension was the city Planning Commission’s approval of an arena master plan while community benefits were still in talks. One Hill responded by flexing its litigation muscles in Common Pleas Court, appealing the commission ruling, which threatened to delay construction. Penguins officials, meanwhile, were absent from negotiations for several months without explanation, a situation that changed after One Hill made
Less than 24 hours after Hill District community leaders reject city and county officials’ proposed community benefits agreement—and watch a copy of it go up in flames—One Hill CBA Coalition Chairman Carl Redwood, standing center, leads a tour of the neighborhood to point out sites residents want to be developed as a result of the new arena construction.
repeated public appeals for the team to come back to the table. When the Penguins returned, a sense of hope grew that an agreement would be reached. Finally, last April, there was a tentative agreement endorsed by the neighborhood’s negotiators, with the final version signed by all parties in August.

The key provision of the agreement is a comprehensive development plan for the Hill District that the city is required to draft by next February with significant input from the community, which historically had little influence in such matters. One Hill occupies four of the nine seats on the committee charged with shaping the master plan, and the Hill’s elected state representative, state senator and city councilmember hold another three.

The deal also calls for the Penguins and the city to contribute $1 million each toward development of a grocery store, now in planning, which the Hill has gone without for nearly three decades. The city relies on contributions from groups other than the primary developer. Milliones believes that the agreement should have required the Penguins to foot the bill for most of the community investment because the team received the public subsidy.

The Hill House Association’s Frazier says, however, that the package was significant because it marked “the first time there was such broad collective community thinking and vetting of the direction the neighborhood wants to go.”

“It was through that community effort that we ended up with a negotiated agreement that

and county agreed to contribute money to create a model “first-source referral center” to prepare residents for the workforce and refer qualified Hill District residents to employers connected with the arena project, who agree to give them first consideration when hiring. Another negotiated benefit is the Neighborhood Partnership Program fund to support further economic development, education, training, youth services and other improvements. The program will receive $3 million over six years from the Bank of New York Mellon, which gets a tax credit for its contribution.

As one of the neighborhood leaders, Milliones says she’s grateful for the resources that will be flowing into the Hill District. But she contends that the contract does not follow the pattern set by other community benefits agreements in that it

I think will have impact for years to come,” he says.

From a national perspective, Pittsburgh foundations’ key role in introducing the benefits agreement concept and supporting efforts to negotiate the contract also was unique. The philanthropic collaborative was among the first in the nation to use local and Fulfilling the Dream Fund matching grants to support efforts to negotiate a community benefits agreement. That strategy also was used in California to support a Los Angeles community coalition that negotiated a 2004 community benefits agreement related to the $11 billion expansion of Los Angeles International Airport. It remains the largest such agreement to date, providing an estimated $500 million in labor, environmental and other benefits.

“IN PITTSBURGH, I WITNESSED YOUNG, EMERGE TO GUIDE THIS INITIATIVE TO SUCCESS. ENGAGE IN DISCUSSIONS ABOUT
A year later, Falk President Kerry O’Donnell approached several foundations about creating a funding collaborative in Pittsburgh to address school finance reform and to help replicate locally the community benefits agreement model to address several of the foundations’ goals for promoting diversity and inclusion. Although the foundations had no specific development project in mind at the time, Falk and the other four foundations pooled $500,000. That amount included $200,000 from the Endowments, nearly half of which supported the CBA process. When contributions from the local foundations were matched by the national Dream Fund established in 2004, the total reached $1 million.

Still, support for this new concept posed some risk.

“I knew this could be contentious … Foundations here don’t have a history of supporting community organizing activities,” says Jane Downing, senior program officer for Economics and Community Development at The Pittsburgh Foundation. “I had conversations with our board and some other people who understood minority contracting about whether they thought that if we explored this opportunity it would be a good thing for Pittsburgh. The question for us was: Do we think this could help address hiring opportunities on publicly financed projects? The answer was yes.”

Achieving a signed CBA agreement for the Hill District has increased the visibility nationally of promising practices in both racial inclusion and community–labor partnerships, adds the Falk Foundation’s O’Donnell. “In Pittsburgh, I witnessed young, progressive and diverse leaders emerge to guide this initiative to success. Their voices are vital as we collectively engage in discussions about the future of our city.”

For Pittsburgh officials, this first encounter with a community benefits agreement revealed both promise and risks. “If it is approached in such a way as to say, ‘How can we make this deal happen and be the best it can be for everyone?’ great things can materialize,” says Rob Stephany, executive director of the Urban Redevelopment Authority of Pittsburgh. “If the approach is, ‘We can stop this thing unless you pay us’ — that poses a risk of slowing down or stopping deals that are financially marginal to begin with.”

For neighborhood leaders, the agreement means more work ahead to sustain the organization and drive that enabled them to succeed at the bargaining table, to negotiate a crucial neighborhood master development plan and to make sure all parties comply with the contract. “It’s one thing to get the agreement, but it’s another to take the steps necessary to make sure the community will actually benefit from it,” says Frazier.

But Redwood, the One Hill co-chair, believes that enduring the arduous bargaining process already has lasting implications for the neighborhood. “A lot of people look at it as organizing the community to get a community benefits agreement. I see it as working on the community benefits agreement to organize the community. The lasting impact is that, as we move forward, our community is better organized and stronger than before.”

Progressive and Diverse Leaders Their Voices Are Vital as We Collectively The Future of Our City.”

KERRY O’DONNELL president, Falk Foundation

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