

The background of the slide features a photograph of a hillside with several houses. One house in the foreground is white with a porch, while another house further up the hill has a brown roof. A girl in a colorful dress is walking on a path in the lower left. A white box with a green corner is overlaid on the right side of the image.

Westside Working Group Recommendations Report

MARCH 2024



PROJECT PURPOSE

To support affordable housing preservation and creation, economic development for BIPOC organizations, and wealth generation and preservation for BIPOC residents of the Westside neighborhood in the City of Pittsfield and Berkshire County.

WHO WE ARE

Smart Growth America is a national nonprofit that envisions a country where no matter where you live, or who you are, you can enjoy living in a place that is healthy, prosperous, and resilient. Through direct technical assistance, advocacy, and thought leadership, SGA works towards solving challenges like climate change, affordable housing, and the need for vibrant local economies.

As part of its larger program of work to support communities in advocating for land use reform that will advance equitable development and improve housing access, especially near transit, SGA provided customized Technical Assistance to Massachusetts community-based organizations via training, development of resources, and research.

Learn more at www.smartgrowthamerica.org.

SMART GROWTH AMERICA PROJECT TEAM

Lead Report Writer: Jamie Zouras, Senior Program Manager, Land Use and Development
Toccarra Nicole Thomas, Director, Land Use and Development
Sam Gordon, Intern, Land Use and Development

With support from:

Katharine Burgess, Vice President, Land Use and Development
Eric Cova, Director of Communications
Joseph Mendonca, Intern, Land Use and Development

Westside Legends is a nonprofit that looks to improve the quality of life and provide a better future for the Westside section of Pittsfield by implementing uplifting projects and programs in the community and working through and with diversity of all kinds. WSL believes that everyone benefits from hearing Westside resident stories, which are rich in history and tell the narrative of how far Pittsfield, MA natives have come. Through its scholarships, programs, and event planning work, WSL gives back to the Westside community while uniting residents and improving lives.

Learn more at <https://www.westsidelegends.org/>



WESTSIDE WORKING GROUP MEMBERS

Steve Abellie

Board Member

[Berkshire Black Economic Council Inc. \(BBEC\)](#)

Beverly Bolden

Vice President

[Westside Legends](#)

Myla Franklin

Community Lending Officer

[Greylock Federal Credit Union](#)

Tony Jackson

President

[Westside Legends](#)

Courteny Morehouse

Senior Environmental Planner

[Berkshire Regional Planning Commission \(BRPC\)](#)

Jamyal Newton

Founder, [Bestead, Inc.](#)

Former Commonwealth Corps Member, [Central Berkshire Habitat for Humanity](#)

Marvin Purry

Treasurer

[Westside Legends](#)

DuBois Thomas

President, [Blackshires Community Empowerment Foundation](#)

Lead Facilitator, [Blackshires Black Leadership Acceleration Program](#)

Jaymie Zapata

Senior Planner, Public Health

[Berkshire Regional Planning Commission \(BRPC\)](#)

This working group was supported by Smart Growth America staff including Sam Gordon, Toccarra Nicole Thomas, and Jamie Zouras.

Executive Summary

Over the course of two months, Westside Legends (WSL) and Smart Growth America (SGA) convened the Westside Working Group to discuss and develop the set of six recommendations detailed in this report to support affordable housing preservation and creation, economic development for BIPOC organizations, and wealth generation and preservation for BIPOC residents of the Westside neighborhood in the City of Pittsfield and Berkshire County.

The Westside neighborhood has not seen the development of new housing for over six decades, according to the [August 2009 Housing Needs and Development Recommendations Report](#), highlighting a housing stagnation issue. This long-standing problem underscores the pressing need for the creation of a significant amount of new units of affordable housing in the area. Key themes and goals for the group included strengthening transparent access to the city leadership, affordable housing, community development, and equitable growth. The recommendations in this report reflect the ideas that originated from the Westside Working Group members and have been further developed by SGA as the technical assistance provider. As this report aims to present community voices as expressed by the Working Group, members' perceptions and opinions are unaltered.

The Westside Working Group, which met throughout Summer 2023, consisted of cross-functional experts, civic leaders, and business leaders who were identified and invited to participate based on their unique lived and work expertise and experiences, involvement in the community, and dedication to

supporting historically underrepresented residents of Pittsfield and Berkshire County.

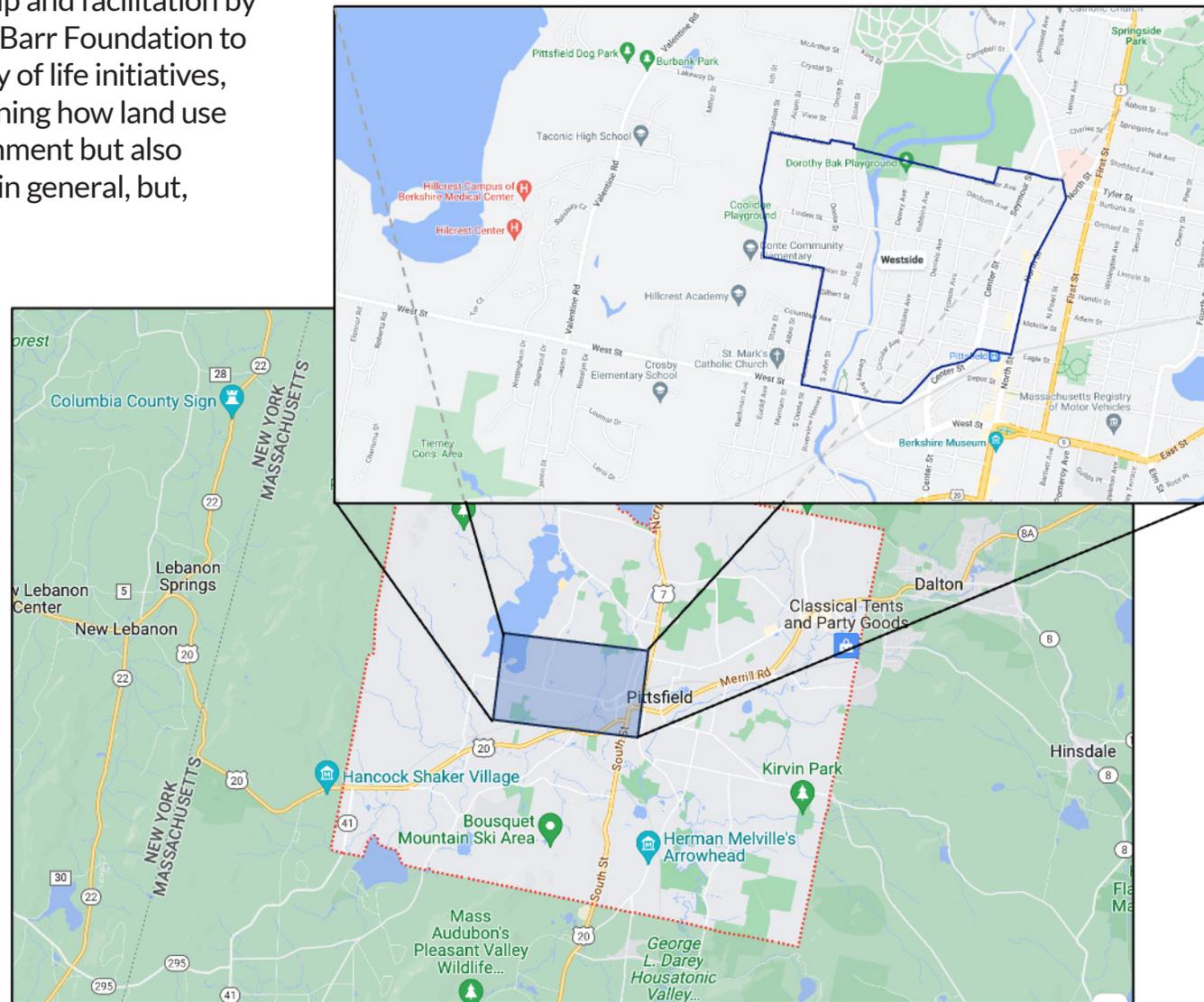
This working group was convened as part of a larger program of work that was generously funded by the Barr Foundation. The purpose of this technical assistance program is to ultimately help community-based organizations become aware of the land use decisions that potentially affect their operations and encourage community members to use their democratic rights in advocating more equitable, well-connected development.

"Westside residents have so much love for each other and the neighborhood. This working group has the opportunity to think critically about how to create new housing, homeownership, and build wealth for the next generation of BIPOC community members"

—Working Group Member

The Westside Working Group met virtually for 90-minute discussions for six consecutive weeks beginning in July 2023. Each week, Westside Working Group members discussed topics and guided questions covering a range of topics relevant to land use, housing, transportation, and economic development. Discussion sessions examined how Euclidean zoning supports and advances inequitable outcomes, how the traditional civic engagement process advances inequitable racial outcomes, obstacles to developing affordable housing in

Pittsfield's Westside, what the community vision is for BIPOC businesses in Pittsfield, what resources should be available to support wealth generation, and what opportunities are needed to share information widely. This iteration of the Westside Working Group is different from previous working group iterations because of the partnership and facilitation by Smart Growth America, funding from the Barr Foundation to directly advance zoning reform and quality of life initiatives, and community members' focus on examining how land use decisions not only impact the built environment but also the quality of life of residents of Pittsfield in general, but, specifically on the Westside.



These topics were discussed in great detail following the schedule below, and a summary of notes and key takeaways from each week can be found in [Appendix A](#).

Week 1: Land Use 101

Week 2: Affordable Housing

Week 3: Economic Development Supporting BIPOC Businesses

Week 4: Wealth Generation for BIPOC Community Members

Week 5: Communications & Messaging

Week 6: Recap & Deep Dive into Recommendations

The discussions in the Westside Working Group led to the development of six recommended actions for the City of Pittsfield and its leaders to consider, all of which are intended to advance equitable development outcomes in the community. This report is representative of the current concerns, issues, and visions for a group of civic-minded leaders who are dedicated to improving the quality of life for current and future residents of Pittsfield's Westside and its surrounding neighborhoods in Berkshire County.

These recommendations are directed to Pittsfield's local government and elected leaders, and the Westside Working Group is ready to support these efforts, and continue the conversation facilitated by this initial report.



Recommendation 1: Support grassroots advocacy, bolster community voices in housing and community development decisions, and expand upon existing community engagement efforts

Recommendation 2: Create an Equitable Development Roundtable to facilitate collaborative and cross-sectional discussions and relationships

Recommendation 3: Create and implement a vacant lot remediation strategy focused on the Westside

Recommendation 4: Develop City-supported educational programming to encourage and support BIPOC wealth generation

Recommendation 5: Update zoning to allow for mixed-use development and infill on the Westside

Recommendation 6: Update the 2009 Master Plan

Recommendation one

Support grassroots advocacy, bolster community voices in housing and community development decisions, and expand upon existing community engagement efforts

The Westside community in Pittsfield is filled with committed and engaged residents who deeply care about improving their neighborhoods. However, there are challenges in effectively engaging with the City, particularly among BIPOC and lower-income households. Successful advocacy and planning are best achieved when they originate within the community and bolster all community voices, and the City of Pittsfield has the opportunity to incorporate these voices in a way that is inclusive to all. By reiterating the desire to hear from all residents, the City can strengthen Westside resident perceptions of the City’s intentions to engage. This renewed commitment will help to alleviate the community’s perception that the City of Pittsfield has not always been receptive to receive input from all residents.

To address these challenges, the City of Pittsfield’s Department of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)—which states the City’s commitment to recognizing, valuing, and responding to the needs of a wide range of individuals who look to City staff for assistance—should take a proactive approach to serve as a liaison between the City, its

STAKEHOLDERS

- Chief Diversity Officer, Department of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
- Department of Community Development
- Community groups, such as Westside Legends

departments, and the residents of the Westside. This can be achieved by leveraging the existing community members, resident-led groups, and trusted non-profit organizations to establish a network of advocates who share common goals with the City. With the February 2022 addition of Pittsfield’s first appointed DEI Officer, the City is already set up with a point-person to connect with community leaders to create a space where all voices are welcomed, heard, and addressed to foster an environment where everyone feels a sense of belonging.

“City-led community meetings should be more engaging. The zoning board of appeals or city planners should come out and participate in some of these group meetings here in the neighborhood so that they can engage with us face to face... and not make decisions based on late 6pm meetings that only two people can show up to.”

—Working Group Member

SHORT-TERM ACTIONS (1-6 MONTHS):

Expand Engagement with Community Groups: The City staff should actively build relationships with community groups like Westside Legends (WSL), who is a trusted community partner that has already built strong relationships with community members. Establish a regular meeting cadence, at least quarterly, to engage with WSL. This interaction will foster collaboration and strengthen community ties.

Support WSL in Hosting Candidate Forums: Elections are an opportune time to advance affordable housing goals, as they serve as a strong window of opportunity for potential candidates to begin formulating strategies and goals for their prospective administrations based on initial conversations with the residents they seek to serve. In the run-up to election cycles, City staff should offer additional support to WSL (and other community groups, but particularly WSL since they have volunteered to begin this process, are already trusted community voices, and have the capacity to continue advancing goals that are advantageous for all) so that WSL can organize candidate forums which would allow residents of the Westside to engage with and begin a dialogue with potential candidates. This support may include providing meeting spaces at City Hall, allocating funds for marketing efforts, and supplying necessary materials. This collaborative effort will ensure that community members are well-informed about the candidates and their stances on critical issues.

MEDIUM- TO LONG-TERM ACTIONS (6 MONTHS AND LONGER):

Expand Accessibility of Community Workshops and Public Meetings: Community workshops or public meetings can serve as a valuable forum for open dialogues and collaboration. These gatherings should facilitate constructive discussions on pressing community concerns and potential solutions. To maximize hearing from diverse community member voices, it's important for City staff and meeting facilitators to meet community members where they are, both physically and figuratively. To combat the perception that the City is not taking steps that would encourage broader participation, gatherings should be expanded to take place at a time that is convenient for all residents, which might mean scheduling meetings on the weekends or after work hours. Residents may also be offered childcare, meal reimbursement, or other benefits to compensate for their time. Existing community workshops and public meetings should also be marketed directly to Westside residents through communication channels best suited for them (i.e. local news channels and newspapers, postcards or fliers, or social media). This could improve resident perceptions that City-led gatherings do not exist or are not welcoming to all residents.

By implementing this recommendation, the City of Pittsfield can foster a stronger sense of community involvement and make substantial progress in addressing the pressing issues faced by the Westside community, particularly during election years. This collaborative approach will help build trust, promote inclusivity, and advance the well-being of all residents.

Recommendation two

Create an Equitable Development Roundtable to facilitate collaborative and cross-sectional discussions and relationships

In the views of members of the Westside Working Group, Pittsfield is currently facing multiple challenges related to the lack of synchrony among various stakeholders in the local and regional community. These challenges include:

- Lack of coordination between the City and the community;
- Limited collaboration between the City of Pittsfield and regional government bodies;
- Insufficient communication between local government and the local private sector, particularly concerning housing and community development initiatives;
- Missed opportunities for small BIPOC businesses to collaborate and support each other; and
- A need to engage financial institutions in investing in BIPOC populations and neighborhoods.

STAKEHOLDERS

- City of Pittsfield
- Regional planning entities
- Nonprofits, such as Westside Legends
- Neighborhood organizations
- Financial institutions, such as Greylock Federal Credit Union
- Small business owners
- Major employers
- Developers
- Local high schools and colleges

To address these challenges and foster a more cohesive and inclusive community development approach, we propose the formation of an official Equitable Development Roundtable collective of public, private, and community organizations. This collaborative effort will aim to bridge the gaps between various stakeholders and create a shared vision for the future of Pittsfield. It is also important that the realty sector is actively involved in these discussions. Real estate professionals can provide valuable insights into housing and property development, which are essential components of community development initiatives.

“Some financial institutions won’t give a loan for a property on the Westside because they see it as a bad investment. These financial institutions need to become a true partner to residents and the City as well.”

—Working Group Member

SHORT-TERM ACTIONS (1-6 MONTHS):

Identify Key Stakeholders and Develop Infrastructure to Support this Effort: Begin by identifying the organizations, partners, and entities that should be brought to the table. This should include representatives from the City of Pittsfield, local nonprofits (e.g., Westside Legends), financial institutions (e.g., Greylock Federal Credit Union), small business owners, major employers, developers, local high schools, and colleges. The roundtable's recognized leaders and key stakeholders should receive stipends as compensation for their time and the opportunity to engage with the City's leadership for the purpose of reviewing recommendations and feedback, which might involve the inclusion of a recurring Planning Commission agenda item.

Set a Timeline: Establish a timeline and window for a potential kickoff meeting to formally initiate the collective effort. Ensure that all relevant stakeholders are invited and encouraged to participate.

MEDIUM- TO LONG-TERM ACTIONS (6 MONTHS AND LONGER):

Develop Tangible Goals: As a roundtable collective dedicated to equitable development, work together to create both short-term and long-term goals for the betterment of Pittsfield. These goals should be focused on inclusive community development, economic growth, and social equity. Topics may include tactics to increase housing supply, advocate for more equitable infrastructure, and build wealth among the BIPOC community. Make sure these goals are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART).

Annual Accountability: Hold the roundtable accountable for achieving these goals by establishing an annual review process. This review will help track progress, identify challenges, and adjust strategies as needed.



By implementing this recommendation, Pittsfield and the Berkshire region can establish a strong cross-sectional partnership that includes all relevant stakeholders. This partnership will not only help overcome existing barriers but also create a shared vision for a more vibrant and inclusive City of Pittsfield.

Recommendation three

Create and implement a vacant lot remediation strategy focused on the Westside

Vacant, abandoned properties on the Westside neighborhood don't benefit the nearby community nor do they benefit the City. As of 2022, the Westside currently has about 50 vacant lots and buildings, putting it in a precarious situation when it comes to crime and neighborhood deterioration. This significant number of vacant lots on the Westside serves as both an eye sore and a missed opportunity. It takes a significant amount of time, money, and energy from the City to keep an eye on and maintain these lots, and these plots of land could otherwise be used for much needed community spaces (such as parks, neighborhood corner stores, or new affordable housing).

Addressing worn down buildings and vacant lots may offer a workforce development initiative that brings additional jobs to the Westside (the unemployment rate of the Westside is over 40% (as of 2019)—approximately 3x higher than the City's rate of 12.7%, with the National Unemployment Rate being 3.8%). According to recent findings by the University of Pennsylvania, neighborhoods where vacant lots have been cleaned up experience a 29% reduction in gun violence, a 22% decrease in burglaries, and a 30% drop in nuisances like noise complaints and illegal dumping.

STAKEHOLDERS

- City Mayor
- City Council
- Chair, Ordinances and Rules Standing Committee; Chair, Finance Committee Standing Committee
- Chair, Community and Economic Development
- Chair, Building and Maintenance, Standing Committee
- Chair Public Works, Standing Committee
- Department of Community Development
- Community Development Board (Planning Commission)
- City Tax Assessor
- Nonprofits, such as Westside Legends
- Community leaders and residents
- Property owners
- Developers
- Legal experts

Creating and implementing an acquisition and remediation strategy for these vacant lots on the Westside and across the City will create spaces that would benefit the community in many ways.

Although the City has a land acquisition program that allowed residents to purchase vacant lots next to their homes for a nominal fee, provided they maintained the property for a specified period. Working Group members were unaware that this program was still ongoing. As a result, parcels of land throughout the Westside have become an eyesore in the community, in addition to posing unsafe conditions. While the City has implemented some community cleanup programs (such as the new [Downtown Blooms initiative](#)), a program specifically dedicated to redeveloping vacant lots on the Westside is needed, as Working Group members expressed that community members feel current policies make it confusing and difficult to obtain and refurbish properties.

To address this issue, we recommend exploring strategies that would streamline the legal process of either the City or a potential community steward acquiring these lots for more productive uses. The development of a vacant lot maintenance program, or providing information on how residents can report and track the maintenance of vacant lots on the Westside would be incredibly beneficial. Additionally, establishing a community land trust, specifically for vacant lots, would also protect these properties from outside investors with exorbitant resources, ensuring that they are developed in ways that benefit the community and improve affordability.

SHORT-TERM ACTIONS (1-6 MONTHS):

Create an Inventory: City staff may begin by creating a comprehensive inventory of vacant and underutilized parcels (land) as well as existing blighted buildings within the Westside area¹. This inventory will provide a clear understanding of the scope of the problem. Prioritize the revitalization of North Street and the Westside by allocating resources for better lighting, infrastructure improvements, and housing development.

Workshop with Westside Legends: City staff should engage the Westside Legends, residents, and community leaders in workshops to gather their input and insights on potential strategies to implement blight remediation. The City may also consider developing a vacant lot maintenance program with community leaders, as their local knowledge and perspectives can be invaluable in shaping effective solutions.

Resource: [New Bedford's Office of Housing and Community Development created a new position: Vacant Property Development Manager](#). This new position will work with property owners, developers, banks, courts, and other city departments to bring vacant properties back into use. This resource is being shared as a guide and inspiration for the City of Pittsfield to model or investigate applicability. A similar position could be created to manage vacant properties throughout the City with a special emphasis on the Westside neighborhood.

Property Owner Outreach: Identify who the property owners are and approach them about the maintenance standards and goals of the community. Establishing a dialogue with property owners is crucial to understanding their intentions and potential willingness to collaborate.

1. Although Working Group members recommended an inventory of vacant city-owned properties, the city had independently begun this process prior to this report.

Utilize Available Funding: Ensure that funds allocated for revitalization and blight remediation are directed towards the Westside neighborhood. Create clear mechanisms for community input and oversight in how these funds are allocated and spent.

MEDIUM- TO LONG-TERM ACTIONS (6 MONTHS AND LONGER):

Conversion of Vacant Buildings: Consider permitting and encouraging the conversion of currently vacant buildings into multifamily housing. In nearby Housatonic, for example, [*an abandoned school building*](#) in the heart of downtown is being converted into an eight-unit affordable rental complex. This involves advertising the space to developers as a good investment opportunity, taking stock of the needs of current and future residents, and ensuring that local businesses feel supported when new developments are built. This can help revitalize the neighborhood while addressing the housing shortage and increase property taxes that flow to the City.

Rework Legal Tools: Investigate and rework legal tools necessary to enable a more streamlined process for transferring ownership of abandoned lots. This may involve revising eminent domain laws, updating zoning regulations, or creating incentives for property owners to sell or redevelop their properties.

Establish a Community Land Trust: A community land trust, specifically for vacant lots, would protect these properties from outside investors with exorbitant resources, ensuring that they are developed in ways that benefit the community and improve affordability.



By implementing this recommendation, the City can work in tandem with community groups to address the challenge of blighted properties and vacant lots more effectively, streamline legal processes, and achieve the shared goal of revitalizing the Westside neighborhood for the benefit of all residents. Regular dialogues and forums where community members can share their insights, concerns, and ideas related to vacant properties and neighborhood revitalization will foster a sense of collaboration and transparency.

Recommendation four

Develop City-supported educational programming to encourage and support BIPOC wealth generation

The BIPOC population confronts significant challenges in retaining generational wealth through housing, exacerbated by inaccessible first-time homebuyer programs and a lack of confidence in navigating them. BIPOC community members often feel ill-prepared for homeownership, leading to a lower percentage of mortgage applications due to the fear of rejection. Additionally, BIPOC entrepreneurs struggle to keep their businesses afloat.

There are a variety of systemic issues that contribute to this struggle, but the Westside Working Group specifically identified a limited awareness of available resources by potential and current small business owners. There is a critical need for freely accessible information and direct outreach to the community regarding these resources, including business support and education, which many individuals and small business owners currently lack.

The Westside Working Group spent a significant amount of time explaining that technical training on concepts such as accounting, supply chain, marketing, distribution, growth planning, compliance, licenses, and annual report findings is essential for small businesses to navigate the complexities of tax laws at various government levels.

STAKEHOLDERS

- City Mayor
- Department of Community Development
- Chief Diversity Officer, Department of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion
- President and Executive Director, Berkshire Black Economic Council (BBEC)
- Berkshire Regional Planning Commission (BRPC)
- President, Blackshires Community Empowerment Foundation
- Financial institutions, such as Greylock Federal Credit Union, and other regional banks and credit unions
- Nonprofits, such as Westside Legends
- Pittsfield Public School District

The Berkshire Black Economic Council (BBEC)—a membership-based organization—is dedicated to increasing the amount of support for these functions and provides direct assistance for members BIPOC and small businesses in the Berkshires and across the commonwealth. However, the perception of a ‘lack of resources’ from the City for the Westside remains.

“We need to support aspiring small BIPOC business owners in navigating all of the red tape in order to obtain a business license. There needs to be an easier, and more comfortable platform of accessibility.”

—Working Group Member

To address these challenges, comprehensive efforts are required to empower BIPOC communities through education, increased accessibility, and tailored support mechanisms. The City should aggressively publicize a comprehensive initiative in collaboration with public entities and local financial institutions to foster generational financial literacy within the BIPOC community, with a specific focus on homeownership and small business development.

To encourage participation, the City should introduce incentives and proactively distribute information directly to residents, meeting them where they are. Additionally, the initiative should prioritize the creation and implementation of first-time homebuyer programs, and ensure that those programs are accessible and communicated especially to those on the Westside. Furthermore, the City should extend support to and learn from existing initiatives such as the BBEC's Incubator Program.

SHORT-TERM ACTIONS (1-6 MONTHS):

Identify and Promote Existing Educational Resources:

Collaborate with the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission (BRPC) and nonprofits including Berkshire Black Economic Council (BBEC) and Westside Legends to compile a list of existing educational resources on homeownership and small business development. Collaborate with Blackshires Community Empowerment Foundation, which operates the only leadership accelerator for BIPOC community members in Berkshire County, providing educational programming geared toward wealth generation and a BIPOC ownership/controllership ecology. Create a centralized online platform or pamphlet that showcases these resources and distributes them widely to the BIPOC community. Ensure the

information is accessible, culturally sensitive, and available in multiple languages.

Leverage Available Funding Sources: Explore opportunities to utilize existing available funding sources (e.g. \$500,000 [*Pittsfield Small Business Fund*](#)). Develop clear guidelines for accessing this fund and publicize it within the BIPOC community. Work with local financial institutions and nonprofits to streamline the application process and provide assistance to potential applicants.

Inclusive Community Outreach and Engagement: The City should make a concerted effort to engage directly with residents in their communities. Host informational sessions, workshops, and town hall meetings to educate BIPOC community members about available resources, housing programs, and small business support. Use a blend of traditional and neo-traditional advertising platforms to spread the word about these programs and encourage community members to access these services. Develop metrics for accountability and transparency to report out on the success of the programs.

Expand upon the Membership Networking Opportunities Provided by the BBEC by Establishing a Networking Pipeline for Potential Small BIPOC Business Owners: Create a networking program or forum for potential small BIPOC businesses to connect, share experiences, and learn the basics of creating and starting a business, as well as support each other. Encourage collaboration and partnership among these businesses to help them thrive collectively. This networking pipeline will provide a "preview" of the realities of running a small business and socialize the BBEC membership opportunities with the pipeline. Ideally, the pipeline will funnel directly into the BBEC membership process.

MEDIUM- TO LONG-TERM ACTIONS (6 MONTHS AND LONGER):

Comprehensive City-Led Initiative: Develop a comprehensive City-led initiative in partnership with the Department of Community Development, local financial institutions, and nonprofits, with a focus on promoting generational financial literacy in the BIPOC community. This initiative should include educational programs, workshops, and mentorship opportunities related to home ownership and small business development.

Incentives for Homeownership: The City, local affordable housing trusts, and/or affordable housing providers may create, implement, and advertise first-time homebuyer programs specifically tailored to the Westside community. These programs should provide financial incentives, reduced interest rates, and down payment assistance to BIPOC individuals and families looking to purchase homes specifically within the Westside neighborhood. Work with local banks and credit unions to facilitate access to these incentives. This could be achieved by either retrofitting existing funding programs to be geographically targeted to the Westside or creating new, direct homeownership programs geographically targeted to the Westside neighborhood. Higher homeownership vacancy rates within the Westside signals a need for support and to directly alleviate the effects of Urban Renewal. Below are some examples of programs that could serve as templates for the City to adopt, and/or funding sources that the City could connect with to deliver this type of funding to the Westside.

Resource: [*Burlington, VT, Homeownership Equity Program*](#)

Resource: [*MassHousing First Time Homebuyer Program*](#)

Financially Support the BBEC Incubator Program and Events: Provide ongoing financial support for the BBEC Incubator Program and consider organizing community events like flea markets or local business expos to showcase BIPOC-owned businesses. Consider hosting events on recently renovated vacant lots, which will help create a sense of place and ownership for these vacant lots, provide ongoing “eyes on the street” that will naturally improve community safety, and mentally prepare residents for future redevelopment projects on said vacant lots. These events can help generate awareness, promote economic growth, and encourage entrepreneurship within the community. This initiative could be funded by using AARPA Dollars to directly support the BBEC in this initiative. To do so, the City may directly apply for federal funds via the [*Commonwealth*](#) and then distribute those funds as a grant to the BBEC. The City may also encourage the BBEC to apply for [*SBA funds*](#) to support this initiative.

Proactive Partnerships: Establish proactive partnerships with the Pittsfield Public School District to integrate financial literacy education into the curriculum, ensuring that young BIPOC students are equipped with essential financial skills for their future.

By implementing this recommendation and involving various stakeholders, Pittsfield can work toward addressing the housing and small business challenges faced by BIPOC community members, ultimately promoting generational financial empowerment and sustainability.

Recommendation five

Update zoning to allow for mixed-use development and infill on the Westside

Conventional “Euclidean” zoning intentionally separates land uses (residential, commercial, industrial, etc.) and has been frequently used over the past century as a tool to systematically isolate BIPOC neighborhoods and promote car-dependent sprawl. And the Westside neighborhood in Pittsfield has a [*history of racist land use policies and practices*](#) that have segregated BIPOC community members as the entire community was Redlined. The lingering effects of government-sanctioned segregation and redlining practices have resulted in white neighborhoods receiving disproportionately larger benefits of safe, convenient, reliable, affordable infrastructure, while Black communities continue to suffer from underinvestment.

Additionally, according to [*Pittsfield’s Permitting Guidebook*](#), single-family home projects do not require site plan approval as they are a by-right use, while other uses (business, commercial, industrial, and institutional projects) require a Special Use Permit. This system, which prioritizes single-family zoning, has created barriers to equitable housing and development and is not aligned with community visions for redevelopment on the Westside. This is especially poignant due to the Westside’s history of urban renewal and redlining, which has left it vulnerable to gentrification.

STAKEHOLDERS

- City Manager
- City Council
- Department of Community Development
- Community Development Board
- Zoning Board of Appeals
- Regional Planning Agencies
- Community members and leaders

Some of these challenges and barriers include:

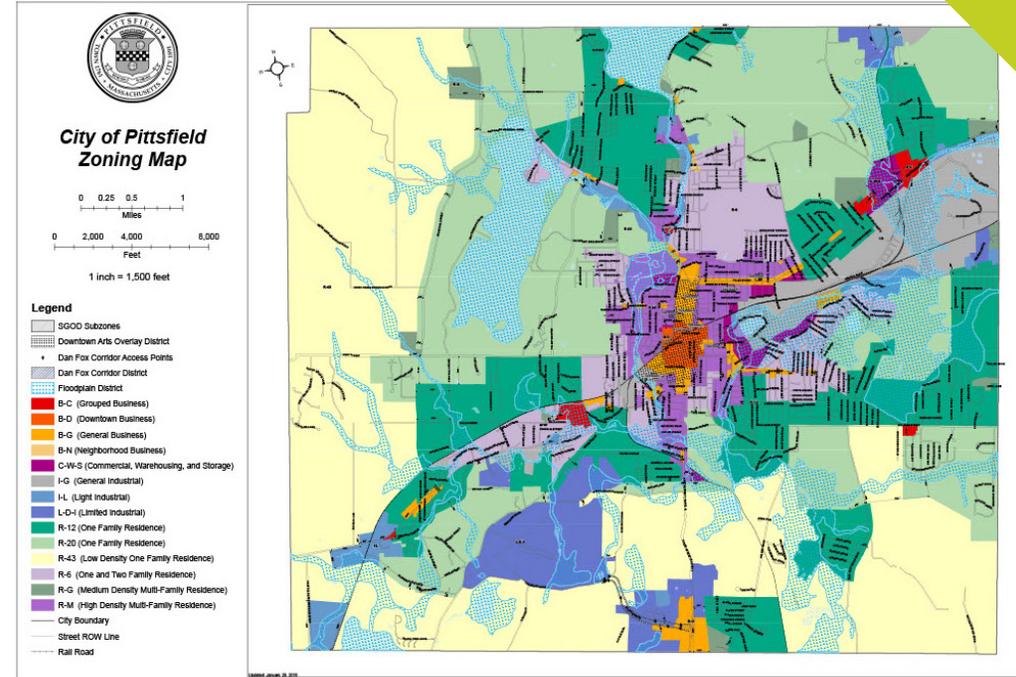
- Lack of new housing construction over the past 60 years;
- Complex and challenging Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU) permitting processes;
- Planning and processes not tailored to Pittsfield’s size and Westside’s unique needs;
- Limited housing options, with some rent payments higher than mortgage payments; and
- Poor quality housing and discrimination.

“How do we empower individuals, particularly the next generation of leaders, with the skills needed to engage with the City about a messy and complicated topic like zoning reform?”

—Working Group Member

To address the historic challenges and barriers on the Westside, the City should modernize zoning regulations on the Westside to restore it to economic vibrancy for the residents who live there. Updated zoning can enable mixed-use development as a by-right option throughout the Westside, which will naturally encourage mixed-use and infill development. Additionally, in areas with smaller lot sizes, accessory dwelling units (ADUs) offer a viable solution to maximize land usage and diversify housing options within the current zoning regulations. As a response to the national housing crisis, numerous cities in Massachusetts with an older housing stock, such as Salem, have amended their zoning ordinances to permit construction of ADUs by-right. This easing of city permitting processes has created new housing opportunities in neighborhoods across the Commonwealth that sorely lack them.

While the City of Pittsfield currently allows some form of ADUs, Working Group members believe there has been conflicting information provided to potential developers about the availability and applicability of local regulations. Permitting and promoting a variety of building types like duplexes, fourplexes, and cottage courts can also introduce more mid-size, affordable units to the Westside, addressing housing affordability challenges. This “gentle” increase in housing density, introducing townhomes, two- to four-family homes, and small-scale apartment or condominium buildings—referred to as *gentle density*—could increase the number of homes available and bring down average housing prices, while retaining the physical scale of the neighborhood.



SHORT-TERM ACTIONS (1-6 MONTHS):

Adopt By-Right Approval and Zoning Text Amendments:

Implement by-right approval for housing typologies in all residential zoning designations in the Westside to streamline and expedite the process, avoiding lengthy and costly discretionary review processes of developments that would benefit community members. Zoning text amendments can allow for all housing typologies within the residential designations on the Westside.

Implement a Typical Pre-Approved Gentle Density Housing Permit Process:

These pre-approved permits will consist of several housing typologies that have been pre-approved by the City for over the counter permits. The housing typologies such as duplexes, triplexes, ADUs, and other housing typologies will be selected in order to enhance and complement the existing neighborhood character on

the Westside while adding gentle density and streamlining the permitting process for small-scale developers, existing homeowners, and infill developers. This pre-approval process will also provide much needed naturally attainable housing at a range of income types and revitalize potentially vacant properties increasing property taxes for the City.

Review the Current ADU Pre-Approvals: The resources listed below serve as nationally recognized best practices for the adoption and administration of ADU pre-approved processes, as well as educational offerings for homeowners interested in deploying ADUs.

Resource: [*The California Housing and Community Development Department ADU best practices*](#)

Resource: [*Napa Sonoma County ADU Creating a Pre-Approved ADU Permitting Process*](#)

Resource: [*The State of Vermont ADU Strategy Guide to Address Housing Access*](#)

The Vermont state government currently offers up to \$50,000 for ADU construction when there is a commitment to keeping the units in long-term rental use at Fair Market rates. While this is a state level action, the City could use this as a guide for developing a City pre-approved ADU financing program and/or as a resource for determining how to maintain and incentivize long-term affordability for ADUs.

Resource: [*U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Revisions to Rental Income Policies, Property Eligibility, and Appraisal Protocols for Accessory Dwelling Units*](#)

MEDIUM- TO LONG-TERM ACTIONS (6 MONTHS AND LONGER):

Consider Adopting a Form-Based Code:¹ Explore the adoption of a [*form-based code*](#) for the Westside. This approach prioritizes human-scale livability, public realm elements, and affordable housing, reducing the segregationary effects of traditional zoning.

Establish a Volunteer Neighborhood Task Force: Create a volunteer Neighborhood Task force to work in concert with the City of Pittsfield's code enforcement department to prevent potential code violations before they become community eyesores. For example, the Task Force could work with the City to identify vacant lots and develop a triage system to address the lots. Train task force members to identify and report properties that do not adhere to code guidelines, fostering community engagement and accountability.

Resource: [*The Neighborhood Improvement Task Force of New Bedford, MA*](#)

Resource: [*Neighborhood Improvement Advisory Council of Salem, MA*](#)

Zoning plays a crucial role in shaping the built environment and the quality of life of residents, by either promoting or hindering progress. Updating zoning regulations in Pittsfield will streamline development processes and promote affordable housing, and establishing a Neighborhood Task Force will ensure proper enforcement and community involvement, fostering a more equitable and vibrant Westside.

1. Although Working Group members recommended adopting a form-based code, the city had independently begun this process prior to this report.

Recommendation six

Update the 2009 Master Plan

The Westside neighborhood has not seen the development of new housing for over six decades, highlighting a housing stagnation issue. This long-standing problem underscores the pressing need for the creation of a significant amount of new units of affordable housing in the area, beginning with at least 100 new units in Westside (see Appendix B for a breakdown of the difference between affordable and subsidized housing). While the City and county as a whole have ample potential for growth, government officials must partner with and respect residents and grassroots organizations, particularly within communities like the Westside, to proactively address concerns of residents who have been disadvantaged by problematic development practices. Addressing the housing shortage in this neighborhood can serve as a catalyst for broader development and revitalization efforts throughout the city and county, ultimately benefiting the entire region.

The City is advised to engage in comprehensive long-range planning efforts, including updating the 2009 Master Plan and Housing Needs Analysis, creation of an Equitable Development Plan, and adding this Recommendations Report as a comprehensive plan amendment for the Westside neighborhood. These updates must address the creation and preservation of affordable housing, as this is one of the greatest societal crises of our time, both in the Westside neighborhood and nationwide.

STAKEHOLDERS

- Department of Community Development
- Community members and leaders
- City Manager
- City Council
- Planning Commission
- Developers

These efforts should also focus on attracting more residents to the area to boost foot traffic and business opportunities. Collaborative work with existing residents and developers is crucial to support the creation of housing that caters to a diverse range of potential residents, encompassing various income levels and life stages.

One proposed approach is to establish a community benefits agreement (CBA), which is a legally binding contract between residents and private development entities. CBAs integrate community needs and desires into the planning process and outline how the community will benefit post-development. Typically, legal professionals negotiate on behalf of the community, sometimes with the involvement of non-profit or community-based organizations as support systems. Specific priorities, such as job guarantees for local residents, funding for workforce development, and contributions to housing trust funds, can help minimize displacement.

Allocating funds to community development or restoration projects, such as libraries and community centers, is also suggested to enhance local resources.

Success with CBAs is often seen in communities with a strong alliance of residents, non-profit organizations, and like-minded groups sharing a common vision for the post-development future of their community. Therefore, fostering such alliances is key to effective long-term planning and equitable development.

SHORT-TERM ACTIONS (1-6 MONTHS):

Assess the City's Capacity: Begin by assessing the City's capacity to initiate a comprehensive update of the 2009 Master Plan and Housing Needs Analysis. This assessment will help identify the resources, expertise, and potential challenges in the planning process.

Identify Key Stakeholders: Assemble a list of key stakeholders and community entities that will be actively engaged in the planning process. These stakeholders should represent a diverse range of voices, including residents, local businesses, non-profit organizations, and community leaders.

Review Current Master Plan: Conduct a thorough review of the goals and objectives outlined in the 2009 Master Plan. Identify gaps in the plan, particularly those related to strengthening transparent access to the city leadership, affordable housing, community development, and equitable growth.

Develop a Vision: Collaborate with community stakeholders to develop a shared vision for an Equitable Development Plan that addresses the specific needs and aspirations of Westside residents. This vision should prioritize the goals outlined in this report.



Engage Department of Community Development:

Collaborate closely with the Department of Community Development to leverage resources, expertise, and funding opportunities that can support the implementation of the Equitable Development Plan.

Resource: [North End Equitable Development Strategy \(NEEDS\)](#)

NEEDS is a national example of a community that worked with the residents to develop a comprehensive plan and economic development strategy that was beneficial for all. The strategy was created by SGA and the Local Advocacy Group of the North End Neighborhood of Newport, Rhode Island. The NEEDS plan serves as a roadmap for equitable development and policy in that part of Newport.

“The City should continue to be intentional about creating and maintaining a larger pool of resources or funding for local affordable housing and housing maintenance.”

—Working Group Member

MEDIUM- TO LONG-TERM ACTIONS (6 MONTHS AND LONGER):

Community Benefits Agreement (CBA): Consider the creation of a Community Benefits Agreement (CBA) as a critical tool in the development process. A CBA can act as a legally binding contract between residents and private development entities, ensuring that the community's needs are integrated into the planning process. Key priorities within the CBA should include guaranteed jobs for neighborhood residents, funding for workforce development programs, contributions to housing trust funds, and investments in community development projects like libraries, community centers, and grocery stores.

Annual Master Plan Review: Establish a mechanism for an annual review of the Master Plan to determine necessary amendments and measure progress towards the community's goals. This iterative approach ensures that the plan remains relevant and adaptable to changing circumstances.

Addressing the housing challenge on Westside requires a sustained commitment to equitable growth and community engagement. By following this recommendation, the City can work towards not only providing affordable housing but also revitalizing the neighborhood, creating economic opportunities, and ensuring that growth in Berkshire County benefits all residents.



Additional Considerations

In addition to the six primary recommendations outlined above, the Westside Working Group identified other areas of opportunity for the City of Pittsfield, including the following, among others.

Housing Insecurity: Housing insecurity is at the heart of various community issues, including crime, safety, and mental health. The City primarily focuses on addressing crime and safety through enforcement but should adopt a more progressive approach centered around housing insecurity, which *encompasses* a number of challenges, such as having trouble paying rent, overcrowding, or spending the bulk of household income on housing.

By updating zoning to increase new, affordable units and introduce a variety of housing typologies, as well as increasing awareness of government resources to assist in homeownership and wealth building opportunities, the City of Pittsfield could address housing insecurity with more housing access. Increasing affordable housing near transit would also decrease residents' requirement to own a car, decreasing cost of living significantly.

Transportation Improvements: Improvements in transportation infrastructure within Berkshire County are crucial for the region's overall development, economic growth, and quality of life. Berkshire County is known for its scenic beauty, cultural attractions, and outdoor recreational opportunities. However, like many rural areas, it faces challenges related to transportation that need to be addressed to ensure its continued prosperity. Additionally, identifying affordable housing with transportation connectivity is near impossible.

Climate Resilience: Climate change is a threat multiplier and will continue to exacerbate the communities challenges, and will hit low-income residents the hardest. Low-income community members are the least likely to have additional insurance coverage, emergency savings for losses from climate events or design interventions to better prepare homes for weather impacts. Stormwater inundation and flooding present the most significant risks to Pittsfield, and are likely to put pressure on infrastructure, dams, roads, and housing.

Future development should also seek to reduce emissions. Incentive programs to reduce upfront costs of renewable energy installations and climate-resilient building practices, are crucial to increasing uptake and benefit by a range of community members.

Increased Representation: There is a need for increased representation of BIPOC individuals in City Hall. The presence and involvement of individuals from diverse backgrounds in various sectors of society, including government and public administration, is important to have diverse viewpoints, well-rounded and informed decision-making, increased trust in the government, higher civic engagement, and role models for younger generations.

Communication Methods: Current communication channels used by the City include website posts, the Berkshire Eagle news outlet, and physical newspapers. Due to staff turnover, there are concerns that new staff may not know community communication preferences, highlighting the need for better systems to update new staff on neighborhood relationships.

At-Home Program: The City's At-Home Program provides housing repair funding, but frustration arises due to the number of hurdles that need to be jumped over in order to participate in this program, such as the requirement of showing three competitive bids for repairs.

New Partners: Identifying new partners is important, as demonstrated by the CEO of Mill Town Capital enthusiastically participating in Westside Legends' annual neighborhood Super Soap Box Derby Race in the summer of 2023.



Conclusion

The Smart Growth America team wishes to express our thanks to Westside Legends for the opportunity to work with the community and its leadership. The City of Pittsfield has the opportunity to leverage a strong alliance of community residents that share a common vision and goals.

By supporting grassroots advocacy, bolstering community voices in housing and community development decisions, and expanding upon existing community engagement efforts (**Recommendation 1**), the City can foster a stronger and more inclusive sense of community involvement and make substantial progress in addressing the pressing issues faced by the Westside community. The creation of an Equitable Development Roundtable to facilitate collaborative and cross-sectional discussions and relationships (**Recommendation 2**) may help bridge gaps between stakeholders and develop a shared vision for the future of Berkshire County, and implementation of a vacant lot remediation strategy focused on the Westside (**Recommendation 3**) may create opportunities for the community to revitalize neglected areas while gaining autonomy through establishments of a community land trust. BIPOC community members feel ill-prepared for homeownership and entrepreneurship, which are key methods of building generational wealth. The development of City-supported educational programming to encourage and support BIPOC wealth generation (**Recommendation 4**) is essential to ensure all residents are receiving training to navigate barriers holding them back from achieving such milestones. It is also clear that the Westside is in extreme

need for new, affordable housing. By updating zoning to allow for mixed-use development (**Recommendation 5**) and updating the 2009 Master Plan (**Recommendation 6**), the City can rectify its history of racist land use policies and practices that have segregated BIPOC community members while offering diversified housing options. Attracting more residents to the area may boost foot traffic and business opportunities, benefiting the entire region.

Overall, these recommendations, when implemented, can help the City of Pittsfield start to build trust, promote inclusivity, and advance the well-being of all residents, particularly those in the Westside community. The success of these recommendations relies heavily on the active participation of Westside residents and other stakeholders, necessitating regular communication, forums for feedback, and mechanisms for accountability. By working collaboratively, Pittsfield can take significant steps toward creating a brighter future for its residents and the city as a whole.

Those interesting in collaborating should get in touch with Westside Legends by visiting westsidelegends.org/contact.

Appendices

Appendix A - [Westside Working Group compiled notes summary](#)

Appendix B - [Affordable housing definitions primer](#)



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