

# The PUSH Green Development Zone: Building Housing Equity from the Ground Up

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## INTRODUCTION

The struggle for housing equity requires multiple strategies that vary from region to region and change over time. In this article, we describe one effort that is finding success in Buffalo, New York: the creation of a Green Development Zone through a combination of community organizing, policy advocacy, workforce development, green, affordable housing, and neighborhood renewal. First, however, we ground our analysis in a brief review of Buffalo's history, demographics, and housing equity challenges.

## I. BUFFALO'S HISTORY

The Buffalo-Niagara region boomed from roughly 1825 to 1950 due to its strategic location as the easternmost port on the Great Lakes and the terminus of the Erie Canal. As raw materials such as grain, timber, and iron ore flowed through the area, industries developed to store, process, and manufacture goods from those materials. Niagara Falls became an enduring tourist attraction, but, even more importantly for the local economy, a massive source of cheap hydropower. As the Erie Canal's importance waned, Buffalo remained a major transportation hub due to its extensive network of railway lines. World War II brought a final burst

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of growth in industries such as steel, automobiles, aircraft, and chemicals, but, beginning in the 1970s, manufacturing plummeted, economic growth stalled, and the region's population declined: a trend that continued until at least 2010. Rust Belt cities like Buffalo, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, and Detroit were among the few large metropolitan regions in the United States to experience a population decline between 2000 and 2010.<sup>1</sup>

While experiencing this decline, Buffalo also shared in the national rush toward suburbanization. The city's population dropped from 580,132 in 1950 to 261,310 in 2010, while the suburban population sharply increased.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the region as a whole experienced "sprawl without growth." New infrastructure, financed mostly by federal and state government, brought highways, sewers, and water lines to the suburbs and exurbs. Federal housing policies discouraged investment in city neighborhoods while rewarding it outside the cities. Racial prejudice added fuel to the fire, as whites left certain neighborhoods in droves, particularly on the east side of the city.

## II. DEMOGRAPHICS

As Buffalo's economy grew, it drew successive waves of new arrivals—particularly from Germany, Ireland, Poland, Italy, Puerto Rico, and the southern United States. Buffalo's neighborhoods were delineated by ethnicity and often anchored by ethnically-based churches, businesses, social halls, and taverns. As job loss set in, in-migration slowed drastically, and, unlike many other U.S. cities, Buffalo has seen few immigrants from Mexico or Asia; thus, today, Buffalo's once dominant foreign-born population is unusually

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1. RAMON GARCIA, P'SHIP FOR THE PUB. GOOD, POPULATION TRENDS IN BUFFALO-NIAGARA 2 (2012), <http://archives.ppgbuffalo.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/population-2012-garcia2.pdf>.

2. *Id.* at 1.

small.<sup>3</sup>

In recent years, however, Buffalo has become a major destination for refugees fleeing persecution, civil war, and disaster in their native lands. Most of the refugees live within city limits, many of them on the city's west side. Some of the most common countries of origin are Burma, Bhutan, Somalia, and Iraq.<sup>4</sup> The quality of life for Buffalo's refugees varies dramatically. Rates of poverty, post-traumatic stress, and other social ills are high, as many experienced violence, deprivation, and isolation in their home countries and in years spent in refugee camps.<sup>5</sup> Language and cultural barriers are often substantial. Yet, the city's west side is blossoming with refugee-owned businesses and refugee-led mutual aid associations, faith institutions, and other signs of civic engagement and progress.

As of the 2010 Census, the metropolitan region was approximately 80% white, 12% black, 4% Hispanic, and 2% Asian.<sup>6</sup> From 2000 to 2014, the white population in Buffalo Niagara fell 8%, the black population grew 2%, the Hispanic population grew 55%, the Asian and Pacific Islander population grew 117%, and the mixed/other population grew 65%.<sup>7</sup>

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3. DEANDRA FIKE ET AL., P'SHIP FOR THE PUB. GOOD, IMMIGRANTS, REFUGEES, AND LANGUAGES SPOKEN 1 (2015), <http://archives.ppgbuffalo.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/Immigrants-Refugees-and-Languages-Spoken-in-Buffalo.pdf>.

4. *Id.* at 3.

5. *See generally, e.g.*, ISOK KIM, IMMIGRANT & REFUGEE RESEARCH INST., UNIV. AT BUFFALO, BURMESE COMMUNITY BEHAVIORAL HEALTH SURVEY FINAL REPORT: OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY FINDINGS (2016), <https://socialwork.buffalo.edu/content/dam/socialwork/social-research/IRRI/BCBHS-2016-Final-Report-Overview.pdf>.

6. GARCIA, *supra* note 1, at 4.

7. GREATER BUFFALO RACIAL EQUITY ROUNDTABLE, THE RACIAL EQUITY DIVIDEND: BUFFALO'S GREAT OPPORTUNITY 11 (2016), <http://racialequitybuffalo.org/files/documents/report/theequitydividendfinalseptember2016.pdf>.

## III. CONTEMPORARY HOUSING PATTERNS

Suburban flight in a region with low in-migration has left a large vacancy in the city's core. In 2010, the city's vacancy rate was 15.7%: the ninth highest in the nation for cities over 250,000.<sup>8</sup> As of 2010, the city counted 15,897 vacant lots within its borders.<sup>9</sup> Housing abandonment is a particular problem when combined with concentrated poverty. Buffalo's low-income neighborhoods are filled with boarded-up houses and vacant lots, leading to increased drug activity, arson, vandalism, and a cycle of disinvestment and downwardly spiraling property values.

Unfortunately, a weak housing market does not translate into housing affordability for many residents. In 2000, for example, 45.4% of the region's renters paid over 30% of income for rent.<sup>10</sup> High utility costs add to housing burdens. Buffalo area residents pay well above national averages for their electricity and natural gas, and the aged, often un-insulated housing stock further drives costs up.<sup>11</sup> Partly as a result of this affordability problem, 5455 people in Erie County experienced homelessness in 2015.<sup>12</sup>

Buffalo has some of the oldest housing stock of any major city, with 67.3% of units built in 1939 or earlier, and only

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8. *Profile of General Population and Housing Characteristics 2010*, U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, <https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=CF> (last visited Nov. 28, 2017).

9. MARC MASSON, P'SHIP FOR THE PUB. GOOD, VACANT AND ABANDONED HOUSING IN BUFFALO 2 (2014), <http://archives.ppgbuffalo.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/Housing1.pdf>.

10. HELLER SCH. FOR SOC. POLICY & MGMT., *Share of Renters Paying More than 30% of Income for Rent*, DIVERSITY DATA, <http://www.diversitydata.org/Data/Rankings/Show.aspx?ind=264&tf=3&sortby=Name&sort=LowToHigh&notes=True&rt=MetroArea&rgn=None> (last visited Jan. 2, 2016).

11. MASSON, *supra* note 9, at 4.

12. HOMELESS ALLIANCE OF W. N.Y., VISUAL AID: ANNUAL REPORT ON THE STATE OF HOMELESSNESS IN WESTERN NEW YORK (2015), [http://wnyhomeless.org/wp-content/uploads/Annual-report-2015\\_infographic.png](http://wnyhomeless.org/wp-content/uploads/Annual-report-2015_infographic.png).

1.9% of its units built since 2005.<sup>13</sup> Poor housing conditions such as dampness, dust, draftiness, and pest infestation exacerbate asthma, which disproportionately affects people of color in high poverty neighborhoods.<sup>14</sup> Old, badly-maintained housing stock also contributes to the fact that Buffalo has one of the highest levels of lead poisoning in the nation—substantially worse than that of Flint, Michigan.<sup>15</sup> As of May, 2016, there were over 1100 children whose blood lead level exceeded the federal threshold of concern.<sup>16</sup> The lead poisoning rate in predominantly white neighborhoods of the metro region is 0.3%; in predominantly black neighborhoods, it is 3.8%—more than twelve times as high.<sup>17</sup>

Since 2010, Buffalo's development patterns have begun to change. As in many regions across the nation, city living has resurged in popularity, especially among young adults and retirees. Public entities, especially the state of New York, have invested millions of dollars in the city, with a focus on the waterfront, downtown, and a burgeoning medical-educational campus near downtown. Historic architectural treasures around the city have been restored and are drawing

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13. See G. Scott Thomas, *Which Urban Area Has America's Oldest Housing Stock? Hint: We're Close, but It's Not Us*, BIZ. J.: BUFF. BUS. FIRST (Aug. 11, 2016), <http://www.bizjournals.com/buffalo/news/2016/08/11/which-urban-area-has-america-s-oldest-housing.html>; U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, AMERICAN FACTFINDER SELECTED HOUSING CHARACTERISTICS: 2015 AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY 1-YEAR ESTIMATES (2015), [https://factfinder.census.gov/bkmk/table/1.0/en/ACS/15\\_1YR/DP04/0500000US36029.06000](https://factfinder.census.gov/bkmk/table/1.0/en/ACS/15_1YR/DP04/0500000US36029.06000).

14. GALE R. BURSTEIN, ERIE COUNTY, NEW YORK, COMMUNITY HEALTH ASSESSMENT: 2014–2017, at 87–89, <http://www2.erie.gov/health/sites/www2.erie.gov.health/files/uploads/pdfs/cha.pdf>.

15. Jerry Zremski, *Rate of Lead Poisoning for Children in WNY Far Exceeds that of Flint, Mich.*, BUFF. NEWS (Feb. 24, 2016), <http://buffalonews.com/2016/02/24/rate-of-lead-poisoning-for-children-in-wny-far-exceeds-that-of-flint-mich>.

16. Dan Telvock, *Lead Poisoning Worse Than Previously Disclosed*, INVESTIGATIVE POST (May 3, 2016), <http://www.investigativepost.org/2016/05/03/lead-poisoning-much-worse-than-previously-disclosed>.

17. GREATER BUFFALO RACIAL EQUITY ROUNDTABLE, *supra* note 7, at 43.

local and national attention. Two of Buffalo's old retail commercial strips and their surrounding walkable neighborhoods are experiencing substantial reinvestment and a spate of new mixed-use developments.

The result is a tale of two cities. Suburban and exurban residents have rediscovered the city and are spending more time and money there, and, in some cases, moving back in. Elected leaders, the media, and prosperous white residents speak increasingly of Buffalo's renaissance. And yet, poverty rates are getting worse, not better, and most city neighborhoods remain relatively untouched by new investment. The child poverty rate inside the city rose from 37.5% in 2005 to 54% in 2015.<sup>18</sup>

In certain parts of the city, these two trends are colliding head on. Downtown, near the medical campus, and in parts of the west side, rents and sale prices are going up rapidly, while the incomes of existing residents are stagnating or falling.<sup>19</sup> Thus, for the first time, Buffalo is facing gentrification and the threat of large-scale displacement of low-income renters and homeowners, particularly people of color.

#### IV. RACIAL, ECONOMIC AND SPATIAL DISPARITIES

The Buffalo-Niagara metropolitan region is remarkably segregated by race and income, with people of color and people with low incomes concentrated in the urban core. African Americans, for example, represent nearly 40% of the city population, but less than 4% of the suburban

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18. Jay Rey, *More Than Half of Buffalo Children Live in Poverty, New Census Data Show*, BUFF. NEWS (Oct. 1, 2016), <http://buffalonews.com/2016/10/01/half-buffalo-children-live-poverty-new-census-figures-show>.

19. BUFFALO INCLUSIONARY HOUS. COAL., *INCLUSIONARY ZONING: CREATING EQUITY AND LASTING AFFORDABILITY IN THE CITY OF BUFFALO, NEW YORK 1-2* (2016), [https://ppgbuffalo.org/files/documents/iz\\_report.pdf](https://ppgbuffalo.org/files/documents/iz_report.pdf).

population.<sup>20</sup> The 2015 poverty rate in the City of Buffalo was 33%, making it the third poorest city in the nation, behind only Detroit and Cleveland.<sup>21</sup> In sharp contrast, the poverty rate for the metropolitan region as a whole stood just under 16%—close to the national average of 14.7%.<sup>22</sup> The geographic disparity is matched by racial disparities. The rate of black children under the age of six living in poverty is 50%, over three times the rate for white children (15%).<sup>23</sup> In other words, whites and suburbanites are doing better in the Buffalo region than their national peers, whereas people of color and urbanites are doing substantially worse.

These racial disparities are both a cause and an effect of segregated housing patterns. In Buffalo-Niagara, 64% of people of color live in concentrated poverty, compared to 14% of whites.<sup>24</sup> High poverty rates limit the mobility of people of color (for example, many households lack a car, making suburban living nearly impossible). At the same time, growing up in racial and economic segregation greatly increases the chance that residents will end up in poverty, as concentrated poverty dramatically impacts outcomes in education and employment.

Take education, for example. In the Buffalo Public School district, 79% of the students are people of color,<sup>25</sup> and over 75% qualify for free or reduced-price school lunch.<sup>26</sup> Local research shows a very close correlation between the rates of poverty in area schools and their graduation rates and test

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20. GARCIA, *supra* note 1, at 4.

21. Rey, *supra* note 18.

22. *Id.*

23. GREATER BUFFALO RACIAL EQUITY ROUNDTABLE, *supra* note 7, at 20.

24. *See id.* at 45.

25. *Id.* at 22.

26. N.Y. State Educ. Dep't, *Buffalo City School District: School Report Card Data, 2013–2014*, <https://data.nysed.gov/reportcard.php?instid=800000052968&year=2014&createreport=1&freelunch=1> (last visited Dec. 1, 2016).

scores.<sup>27</sup> The graduation rate for students of color in the Buffalo-Niagara region is 61%, compared with 87% for white students.<sup>28</sup>

Similar disparities can be seen in all areas of life. The unemployment rate for the county's African Americans in the period of 2010 to 2014 was 17.3%, compared to 6.4% for whites; this is a substantially larger gap than national averages.<sup>29</sup> The criminal justice system also shows disparities worse than national averages. While African Americans represent about 14% of the population in Erie County, they account for 42% of the arrests.<sup>30</sup>

#### V. RESPONSES TO HOUSING INEQUITY

Over the years, Buffalo residents have developed many responses to housing inequity. For a mid-sized region, Buffalo is lucky to have a non-profit dedicated exclusively to fair housing, Housing Opportunities Made Equal (HOME), which responds to discrimination complaints, offers mobility counseling to tenants seeking better housing options, and engages in public policy advocacy. As patterns in housing discrimination shift, HOME has led the way in shaping policy responses. For example, the City of Buffalo and several suburban towns now prohibit "source of income discrimination," often a proxy for racial discrimination; thus, landlords cannot ban tenants using Section 8 housing

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27. MARC MASSON, P'SHIP FOR THE PUB. GOOD, PUBLIC EDUCATION IN BUFFALO AND THE REGION 3 (2014), <http://archives.ppgbuffalo.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/Education-2014.pdf>.

28. GREATER BUFFALO RACIAL EQUITY ROUNDTABLE, *supra* note 7, at 27.

29. SAM MAGAVERN, P'SHIP FOR THE PUB. GOOD, WORKING TOWARD EQUALITY: EMPLOYMENT AND RACE IN BUFFALO 7 (2016), [https://ppgbuffalo.org/files/documents/equality\\_civil\\_rights/race/equalitycivilrights-\\_working\\_toward\\_equity.pdf](https://ppgbuffalo.org/files/documents/equality_civil_rights/race/equalitycivilrights-_working_toward_equity.pdf).

30. ERIN CARMAN, P'SHIP FOR THE PUB. GOOD, ALARMING DISPARITIES: THE DISPROPORTIONATE NUMBER OF AFRICAN AMERICANS AND HISPANICS IN THE ERIE COUNTY CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM 2 (2013), <https://openbuffalo.org/files/documents/Alarming-Disparities-in-EC-Criminal-Justice-System.pdf>.



vouchers or relying on public assistance. HOME and its allies are currently seeking to extend that law county-wide.<sup>31</sup>

Similarly, as the housing market changes, fair housing advocates are pursuing new strategies. In the largely African American Fruit Belt neighborhood, adjacent to the booming Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus, residents and allied organizations are moving to create the region's first community land trust and asking the city to donate the over 200 vacant lots it owns in the neighborhood to the land trust for permanent affordability and community control. As the city completes a comprehensive overhaul of its zoning code and land use policies, a coalition is demanding an inclusionary zoning policy, in which developers of ten units or more would be required to keep at least 30% of the units affordable.<sup>32</sup>

## VI. PUSH AND THE CITY'S WEST SIDE

One organization advocating for the community land trust and inclusionary zoning is People United for Sustainable Housing (PUSH), a non-profit that combines organizing and advocacy with community development. PUSH is a member-based organization that started when its two founders began canvassing Buffalo's west side, asking residents about the neighborhood's challenges and its goals. When vacant housing and high energy bills surfaced as the top two priorities, PUSH began campaigning for changes in state and local policies, while also starting to purchase and rehabilitate abandoned buildings.

In Buffalo's west side, PUSH saw a particular set of challenges and opportunities. The neighborhood was plagued by high rates of vacancy, poverty, blight, and crime. But it had several key assets, as well. First, it was Buffalo's most diverse neighborhood, with large numbers of whites, blacks,

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31. P'SHIP FOR THE PUB. GOOD, 2016 COMMUNITY AGENDA 2-3 (2016), [https://ppgbuffalo.org/files/documents/community\\_agendas/2016.pdf](https://ppgbuffalo.org/files/documents/community_agendas/2016.pdf).

32. BUFFALO INCLUSIONARY HOUSING COAL., *supra* note 19, at 12.

Puerto Ricans, immigrants, and refugees living side by side. Second, despite its high rates of vacancy and abandonment, it remained denser and more intact than many other neighborhoods with similar poverty rates.

Faced with these opportunities and challenges, PUSH began creating the Green Development Zone (GDZ): a twenty-five block area to be transformed with green affordable housing, vacant lot renewal, improved infrastructure, workforce development, and arts and culture. We will now explore the critical elements of the GDZ and how they relate to housing equity.

#### A. *Community Organizing and Planning*

In the 1960s and early 1970s, it was relatively common for non-profit groups to combine housing development with community organizing for racial and economic equity. Over time, many of these groups grew dependent on government funding and, increasingly, saw themselves as non-profit developers and/or social service agencies rather than social justice advocates. PUSH, by contrast, is rooted in community organizing as a philosophy and a set of practices. Not only do its members elect its board, a majority of whom must be neighborhood residents, but all of its activities and decisions are rooted in door-knocking, one-on-one relationship building, community meetings, and other organizing techniques designed to empower residents and let them guide the group's work.

When it makes development decisions, PUSH employs community planning techniques. Each year PUSH holds a community congress at which the staff and architects present alternatives and gather the input that will shape development. These community planning activities have identified uses for vacant lots and buildings and have generated some large projects. In one example, after hearing that a neglected city park in the heart of the GDZ was a top

priority, PUSH worked with residents to form a plan for a full-scale renovation of the park and then advocated with the city to fund and implement it. As a result, the Massachusetts Avenue Park—once a weedy, crime-ridden eyesore—became an inviting hub for basketball, soccer, cook-outs, and community events.

#### B. *Policy Advocacy*

PUSH's community development work is intertwined with its policy advocacy in mutually beneficial ways. For example, when PUSH heard from residents that their first concern was vacant buildings, it researched the situation and learned that an obscure state agency controlled the buildings. This agency, prompted by Wall Street investment banks, lawyers, and real estate interests, had pioneered a speculative scheme in which it bought tax foreclosure liens from the city, securitized them, and sold them to investors. Because the abandoned homes had little underlying value, there was no incentive to finish foreclosure on them or even to maintain them, and so the buildings were stuck in limbo. PUSH mounted an aggressive advocacy campaign, culminating in the stenciling of Governor Pataki's face onto the boards of the vacant buildings, with two successful results. The State turned the properties back over to the city, which could then complete foreclosure and sell the units, and the State created a funding stream to rehabilitate some of the buildings. PUSH was then able to obtain funding to buy and renovate several of the abandoned homes.

Similarly, after residents complained of high heating bills, PUSH investigated and learned that the utility provider, National Fuel, was making poor use of an energy efficiency program funded by rate payers. Most of the money was going toward marketing and supplying appliance rebates that benefited wealthier, suburban customers. PUSH lead a

coalition that successfully challenged the program, despite vigorous resistance (including a lawsuit) from National Fuel. As a result, more funding flowed to weatherization in lower income neighborhoods such as the GDZ.

A third example of policy advocacy came with PUSH's leadership role in a statewide campaign for a new law titled "Green Jobs Green New York." This law created an innovative low-cost energy efficiency funding stream, in which customers repay the loans as part of their utility bills. Homeowners can get energy conservation improvements with zero out-of-pocket costs, as the decrease in their energy bills more than offsets the loan repayments. Having helped pass Green Jobs Green New York, PUSH pursued a creative strategy to deepen its impact. Using its community organizing techniques, PUSH marketed the program throughout the region and aggregated potential customers. PUSH then referred those customers to contractors in exchange for commitments to hire disadvantaged workers and pay living wages.

In each of these three campaigns, PUSH was guided by principles of housing equity. In each case, it was low-income renters and people of color living in concentrated urban poverty who were disproportionately impacted by the negative public policies and positively affected the victories that PUSH won.

### *C. Development Strategy*

PUSH's development strategy for the GDZ had several key features. PUSH targeted resources in a small area. Sprinkling redevelopment dollars widely does not work well in a city like Buffalo, where many neighborhoods are still depopulating and disinvesting. Scattered, individual homes get improved, but the neighborhood as a whole continues to decline. Only a tight focus ensures that the quality of life for

the neighborhood rises appreciably. PUSH also chose the location for the GDZ carefully, locating it close to the strength and stability of the adjacent Elmwood Village district. By building westward from this corridor and targeting resources, PUSH and its allies were able to reverse the vicious cycle of disinvestment and replace it with a spiral of reinvestment, in which homeowners and rental property owners, seeing the progress made in fixing up the neighborhood, felt enough confidence to begin putting capital into their buildings again.

The spiral of reinvestment posed the danger that PUSH would become a victim of its own success, spurring gentrification and displacement as the neighborhood improved. That meant that it was critical for PUSH to acquire a large number of buildings and vacant lots early on, before property values soared. This required a leap of faith by PUSH and its funders, with PUSH buying properties and mothballing them until it had the capital to renovate them.

PUSH also decided to restrict itself to developing and maintaining ownership of rental properties, leaving homeownership programs to allied organizations. By permanently owning a critical mass of rental properties (PUSH aims for 20% of the units in the GDZ), PUSH can ensure that affordable housing remains in the GDZ even as market prices rise. As of summer 2016, PUSH owned 100 properties in the GDZ, with seventy-five units built or renovated and forty-six more units in the pipeline.

#### *D. Workforce Development*

In housing equity work, there can be a tension between helping people and helping places. Aiding low-income tenants to move to the suburbs may improve their life chances, but it does not aid the neighborhoods they leave behind. Fixing up the buildings in a neighborhood may revive the neighborhood only to price out the existing tenants. One way PUSH addresses this tension is by creating large numbers of permanently affordable rentals, using high

quality design and materials and respecting the historic neighborhood fabric, so that both the tenants and the neighborhood gain. Another way is by using its development work to generate jobs for disadvantaged workers, including neighborhood residents.

PUSH is able to hire a certain number of workers directly as PUSH employees to work on housing construction and property maintenance. But PUSH has also leveraged its purchasing power with contractors to win agreements from them to hire disadvantaged workers for PUSH projects. This technique has proved so successful that PUSH has extended it beyond its own projects, creating a “hiring hall” of workers that other developers and contractors in the city can turn to—particularly if they are striving to meet minority hiring goals. In addition, PUSH has developed social enterprises that offer good, entry-level jobs in its landscaping operations. PUSH Blue does stormwater management work—for example, constructing rain gardens on vacant lots. Recently, PUSH has developed a composting business, collecting yard waste, food scraps, and other materials and turning them into compost for sale. Because of PUSH’s large member base and constant community engagement, it is able to fill many of its jobs with neighborhood word-of-mouth networks (just as many of its tenants come from its base of members and existing neighborhood residents).

#### E. *Sustainability*

Discussions of housing equity do not always include a focus on environmental sustainability, but for PUSH, the two are inseparable. Long term housing affordability—especially in a city like Buffalo with old housing stock, cold winters, and high energy prices—depends on energy efficiency. Racial and economic segregation have concentrated PUSH’s members and their neighbors in the most energy-inefficient housing in the region. In addition, PUSH is intensely aware that air pollution and climate change disproportionately hurt people of color and people with low incomes, and that buildings are

one of the largest sources of greenhouse gas emissions.

Sustainability in the GDZ takes many forms. One is the renewal of vacant lots. One of PUSH's closest allies is the Massachusetts Avenue Project (MAP), which runs an urban farm on thirteen formerly vacant lots in the heart of the GDZ, employing disadvantaged youth and teaching them entrepreneurial skills as well as lessons in farming, food systems, nutrition, advocacy, and leadership. PUSH has collaborated with MAP on some community gardens and developed others on its own. PUSH has also turned many vacant lots into rain gardens, helping to alleviate the city's stormwater overflow issues (old cities like Buffalo tend to have combined stormwater/sanitary sewer systems, with the result that rainfall overwhelms the sewage treatment system and discharges raw sewage directly into local waterways). All told, PUSH has renovated or has plans to renovate roughly 100 vacant lots in the GDZ.

All of PUSH's housing is sustainable. All units are super-insulated—the single most important step in reducing energy bills and greenhouse gas emissions. Many have other green features, such as storm water capture and solar panels. PUSH has even renovated one old house into a “net zero” home which, with solar power, solar hot water, and geothermal heating, generates almost all the energy it needs to run while reducing the tenant's utility bills to nearly nothing. In addition to the homes it owns, PUSH has weatherized roughly 200 privately owned homes in the GDZ, making it the city's greenest neighborhood.

#### F. *Arts and Culture*

Integral to PUSH's vision of an equitable neighborhood and society is the role of arts and culture. PUSH's events in the GDZ tend to be filled with music and dance. Its rallies, protests, and popular education workshops often use theatrical techniques such as satirical skits to get their points across. The arts offer much of the glue in PUSH's movement building, giving voice and value to marginalized

cultures. They allow for creative thinking about issues outside the often technical jargon and processes of community development. They invite people into the community conversation who might otherwise find it boring or intimidating. They reach across barriers of race, culture, and language.

PUSH has supplied crucial support for the WASH Project. This unique grassroots venue was born when Zaw Win, a refugee and former political prisoner from Burma, opened a laundromat in the GDZ. Because of his leadership role in the community, he found the laundromat filled with people who needed more than clean clothes; they needed help reading official correspondence, dealing with landlord problems, and otherwise navigating a new world. With partner Barrett Gordon, Win turned the laundromat into a community center and arts space. To protect WASH's future, PUSH has bought the building and is renovating it into a mixed use space with affordable housing on the top floors and WASH on the bottom.

PUSH is also renovating an old public school building just outside the GDZ into affordable housing for seniors, offices for PUSH, and offices and performance space for two community groups: Ujima, which specializes in engaged theater and the work of African American playwrights, and Peace of the City, which provides afterschool and summer programming, including an annual production of a Shakespeare play, for Buffalo Public School students. By co-locating with these two groups, PUSH will continue to deepen its work at the intersection of equity and art.

#### G. *The Future of the GDZ*

PUSH has several goals for the GDZ. First, PUSH will continue to improve the twenty-five block area core of the GDZ. Second, it will expand the GDZ to encompass more blocks. Third, it will engage with other community groups to explore using some of the GDZ's strategies on the city's east side. Fourth, PUSH will showcase the GDZ to non-profit



developers, funders, and policymakers across the country as a case study in community development and empowerment. Finally, PUSH will advocate for public policies that make it easier to create different versions of the GDZ throughout the region, state, and nation.

#### CONCLUSION

The GDZ represents only twenty-five blocks in a large metropolitan region. Its direct impact on the region's inequities is necessarily limited. And while the GDZ may be something of an equity oasis, it is certainly not an equity utopia. The residents of the GDZ still confront inequity and poverty every day of their lives, and every PUSH victory comes with unintended consequences and complex tensions.

Nonetheless, the GDZ has an importance that stretches beyond its boundaries, and its success proves several key points. It is possible to build a multi-racial, multi-cultural base of empowered residents. It is possible to combine community organizing, policy advocacy, and community planning with successful housing development. It is possible to create large numbers of affordable housing units while respecting the fabric of an old neighborhood. It is possible to create housing that is both green and affordable. It is possible—in a weak housing market—to amass enough properties in a small area to turn the neighborhood around and yet maintain a permanent level of affordability within it. Not only are all these strategies feasible, they have resulted in the most successful example of neighborhood renewal in the Buffalo region.

Housing equity requires systemic policy changes. No amount of block-by-block neighborhood renewal can create wide-scale housing equity in the face of policies that encourage segregation and the concentration of poverty. That is why PUSH focuses much of its energy on organizing and agitating for policies such as inclusionary zoning and energy democracy. The work of the GDZ, however, plays a crucial role in that systems-change advocacy. The GDZ is an

invaluable organizing tool. In the GDZ, residents can see policy victories coming to life and tangibly improving their lives: a strong incentive to get involved. Moreover, residents with stable, affordable, energy-efficient housing are more likely to have the time and resources for civic engagement. The GDZ also educates and persuades policy makers and opinion leaders. When they see that green, equitable development works, and when they see that PUSH is capable of achieving it, they gain respect for the principles and the organization, and they become more receptive to policy advocacy. When it comes to making PUSH's policy goals concrete and appealing, nothing is more persuasive than a walking tour of the GDZ. Nothing inspires people to work for housing equity better than time spent in an equitable community.