

Cities in Transition - Interview

Vacant Property Research Initiative



Ian J. Beniston, AICP
Youngstown, OH

Profile

Ian J. Beniston is the Deputy Director of the Youngstown Neighborhood Development Corporation (YNDC). Under the general direction of the Executive Director, Ian is responsible for the day to day operations of the organization. His duties include management of staff, program and resource development, budgeting and financial management, marketing and communication strategies, and development of robust partnerships and relationships among diverse stakeholders.

Ian brings eight years of urban planning and development experience in the private, non-profit, and public sectors. Previously, Ian served as Director of Policy for the Mahoning Valley Organizing Collaborative. As Director of Policy, he served as a consultant to YNDC's Board of Directors where he assisted with the creation and development of the YNDC. Ian also spent several years working for the nationally recognized urban planning consulting firm, ACP Visioning+Planning. He began his career as an intern in the City of Youngstown's Planning Department during the early stages of the award winning Youngstown 2010 planning process. Over the past three years, Ian has played an integral role in leading the growth of the YNDC into a model neighborhood development organization. He holds a Master of City and Regional Planning from The Ohio State University and a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology from Youngstown State University. He is also a member of the American Institute of Certified Planners. Ian is a native of Youngstown and currently resides there with his wife and two Irish Wolfhounds.

Engaging Cities in Transition

By Joe Schilling, PhD and Natalie Borecki, AICP

As pivotal figures in the Youngstown 2010 Plan process, both Ian Beniston and Phil Kidd agree that community organizing and engagement efforts in a CiT differ in important ways from those in cities with strong markets. With fewer resources and more constraints on basic services, CiTs simultaneously face more critical demand for redevelopment and basic neighborhood capacity than do their stronger-market counterparts.

Both Beniston and Kidd believe that the starting point for CiTs is to restore hope and community confidence. During the Youngstown 2010 process, the two found it necessary to counter widespread disengagement and create momentum with small, immediate, and incremental improvements that people could see and experience in their neighborhoods. Far from negating the need for other capacity-building techniques and tools, such small-scale improvements support more ambitious, sustained action.

Up Close and Personal

“The goal is to reignite neighborhood capacity, and then strategically build upon it; developing it to point they no longer need you,” says Beniston. Working alongside community residents on “boots on the ground” projects, he maintains, is a far more effective to gain participation than the typical public meeting. Beniston calls his recommended approach an “evolved engagement process” that offers many options for involvement, especially hands-on.

Of vital importance, adds Kidd, the pragmatic achievements of a community must be “celebrated and communicated, no matter how small they are.” Strategies for getting the word out include grassroots forms of publicity, media campaigns via video and social networking, and coordination with low-cost, practical planning approaches. “What ultimately creates more hope is having an intentional approach and making progress,” says Kidd. He believes that community groups can develop their own capacity and become self-sustaining when they learn how to be proactive, collaborate with other groups, prioritize problems, and make progress toward action items.



Phil Kidd
Youngstown, OH

Profile

Phil Kidd is the senior organizer at Mahoning Valley Organizing Collaborative (MVOC). Phil's a graduate of Youngstown State University (YSU) with a B.S. in Political Science and Criminal Justice and a M.A. in Criminal Justice. In the past, Kidd has served as Director of Downtown Events and Marketing for the City of Youngstown, Court Administrator for Mahoning County Court of Common Pleas, as well as Second Lieutenant in the U.S. Army. After returning from his service, Kidd launched a grassroots project called the "Defend Youngstown" in an effort to stir community activism and pride for the advancement of City of Youngstown. Kidd presently sits on or has had the opportunity to serve on numerous community boards, which include Mayor's Community Foundation of Youngstown, City of Youngstown Design Review Commission, Mahoning County-Youngstown Vacant Properties Steering Committee, Regional Chamber Government Affairs Council, and Raymond John Wean Foundation Neighborhood Success Grant Program and is a member of the Youngstown Rotary.



In short, the Youngstown approach was not a traditional, meeting-based approach to community engagement. Instead, planners met with community residents in their homes, canvassed door to door, worked with community groups, and used other personal styles of communication.

Strategically Employing Resources

How resources are allocated and employed affect not only the community redevelopment work in a CiT but also community engagement. The scarcity of resources in a CiT means that they must be targeted with care. In Youngstown, much of YNDC's redevelopment work has been focused strategically on several neighborhoods, helping neighborhood groups become more self-sufficient stewards of progress. YNDC's recently completed citywide competition for neighborhood groups, Lots of Green 2.0: A Call for Innovation, inspired the groups to apply their ideas for vacant land reuse projects, with technical and financial resources provided by YNDC (Lots of Green). Not only does this type of program align with the core work of YNDC, it also helps to build the capacity and sustainability of community groups.

After the completion of Youngstown's 2010 Plan, other jurisdictions and media asked for information about the plan, hoping for examples of large-scale highly organized right-sizing and relocation efforts. They quickly discovered much more subtle solutions are being applied.

"Right-sizing discussions have been mostly absent from any formal public agenda," says Beniston. "The relocation that has happened has occurred case by case, very incrementally." For example, YNDC recently had an opportunity to relocate a woman from a highly vacant neighborhood to Idora, but this happened more out of confluence of factors and collaborative work, than a purposeful strategy of taking entire neighborhoods offline.

There is a growing realization in Youngstown, however, that neighborhoods with high vacancies are a drain on the city as a whole. Increasingly, the city is looking for ways to create a path for financial incentives to work in conjunction with strategic choices for where to invest resources and improve city services.



Core Activities for CiT Neighborhood Groups

When asked if there was a core group of activities that neighborhood groups should work on, Beniston offers the following:

1. Conduct a property condition surveys, emphasizing problem sites.
2. Identify distressed properties (boarding; tear-downs).
3. Organize to deal with basic neighborhood daily activities (such as cutting high grass / boarding up properties as citizens instead of waiting for the city).
4. Work to install welcome signs to identify neighborhoods and convey pride.
5. Organize to repair and paint neglected houses with volunteers or other community groups.
6. Organize street, park, and neighborhood clean ups to tackle signs of neighborhood neglect.
7. Employ reuse and greening strategies for vacant properties (neighborhood/community uses as interim uses, such as community gardens, etc.)
8. Build relationships with neighborhood commercial uses (neighborhood/corner markets, etc).
9. Build from strength (don't start on the worst blocks in the neighborhood).
10. Foster a sense of urgency (every day nothing is done is another family leaving or another home going vacant).
11. Have fun (create multiple opportunities to have fun such as the "IdoraFest" a neighborhood festival).
12. Create a range of opportunities for people of all ages to get involved (such as 4H group for young kids, workdays for teenagers/adults, letter writing to be completed by seniors, etc. If someone wants to get involved we encourage groups to find a way).
13. Seek small grassroots grant opportunities (Example: Neighborhood SUCCESS).
14. Develop a collective voice.

Community groups that engage and participate in such processes not only begin to control their own future but also stretch limited resources, enabling other nonprofits and community organizations to tackle larger neighborhood redevelopment and community issues.

Eye Towards Tangible Outcomes

If there was a motto or overarching theme to Beniston's work at YNDC and Kidd's work at MVOC, it would be to focus on tangible outcomes and progress that involve the least resources needed to get the job done. Performance measures help these two organizations sustain efforts, draw in additional resources, and maintain a close link between their work and improvements to the quality of life in

Youngstown neighborhoods.

A key component to this work is bonding residents within neighborhoods and bridging social capital, which enables better neighbor-to-neighbor collaboration to solve problems and manage the everyday issues in their neighborhoods. The growth paradigm that is often the core goal of planning is absent here, partly because it's simply not realistic in the foreseeable future. The focal point of planning in Youngstown, Ohio is community stabilization and the enhancement of the everyday lives of its community residents.



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