

Urban Land Protection Case Study

LAWRENCE, MASSACHUSETTS

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City Profile

Lawrence is a small “gateway city” located 25 miles north of Boston on the Merrimack River. With a land area of just 7 square miles, Lawrence is a diverse, densely populated urban community of 72,000 people in the midst of the predominantly rural and suburban Merrimack Valley region. The city is host to a variety of regional services, including government agencies, a district courthouse, transportation facilities, and a mix of commercial, manufacturing, industrial and small start-up business activities. Lawrence is easily accessible to nearby communities and urban centers by virtue of its proximity to Interstates 495 and 93, State Routes 28, 110, and 114, and the MBTA Commuter Rail’s Haverhill line, which provides a link with Boston’s North Station.

Lawrence has long been known as the Immigrant City—an industrial center rich in ethnic diversity, history, and culture. First settled in 1708, Lawrence was a farming area until it was incorporated as a City in 1853, and was built by entrepreneurs from the Essex Company eager to harness the power of the Merrimack River for textile manufacturing. Within three years of acquiring land from neighboring towns, the Essex Company had built extensive and lasting infrastructure, including the Great Stone Dam, two canals, the Pemberton Reservoir, fifty brick buildings, a large boarding house, and four textile mills. A total of six parks were given to the City by the Essex Company, and by 1924 the City had 185 acres of parks and playsteads. Lawrence’s dense, urban fabric was well-established by this time, leaving a legacy that still defines the look and feel of the city today.

By the early 1900s, Lawrence was the world’s leading manufacturer of woolen textiles, and the demand for labor in the city’s vast mills attracted immigrants from across the world. However, Lawrence’s textile industry dominance was short-lived. The introduction of synthetic fibers in the 1940s and the migration of textile mills away from New England led to a dramatic decline in jobs and population. By 1950, Lawrence had lost more than 20,000 manufacturing jobs. The city’s population went into a steep decline, from a peak of nearly 100,000 in 1920 to approximately 63,000 by 1980. Today, Lawrence’s population has bounced back with a majority Latino population hailing primarily from the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico. This influx of new residents is helping to recharge the city’s economy, bringing new life to neighborhoods that were nearly abandoned over two decades ago. Lawrence is now among the youngest communities in the state, with nearly half its population under the age of 24. This demography has intensified the demand for open space and recreational amenities, especially among children and teenagers.

With three newly-developed open spaces constructed since 2006, the City of Lawrence parks system is now comprised of **40 publicly owned parks totaling more than**



YouthBuild Lawrence is an important partner in Groundwork Lawrence’s GreenStreets tree planting program. These young people earn their GED’s while learning job skills and improving their community.

270 acres of open space. Approximately **half of these parks are less than two acres in size.** Lawrence is also home to a network of underutilized alley-ways that comprise over two acres of open space in or near the downtown core. Groundwork Lawrence’s growing network of community gardens add a food security dimension to the mix of the city’s green space with cultivable soils safe for gardening fruits and vegetables for personal and familial consumption.

By virtue of its history and context, Lawrence holds numerous opportunities for creating additional ambient assets with **hundreds of vacant lots and underutilized alleyways across the city, three rivers running through several of its neighborhoods,** a compact urban scale, and a community requesting the development of more riverfront trails and gardens during public meetings for the City’s 2009 Open Space and Recreation Plan renewal process. At the same time, **Lawrence’s open spaces are poised to impact its residents’ health and well-being:** through the continued regeneration of its built environment with an eye toward sustainability and community health, **Groundwork aims to address Lawrence’s disproportionately high rates of diet and lifestyle-related diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, and obesity.** Bodegas (corner stores) and liquor stores are ubiquitous, particularly in the city’s poorest neighborhoods, and serve as primary sources of sustenance that fuel unhealthy habits. Walking audits conducted by members of Groundwork Lawrence’s high school Green Team program illustrate the need for more pedestrian-oriented improvements such as dedicated walkways, cross-walks, sidewalk repairs, and enforcement of snow-shoveling ordinances, all of which could be incorporated into the city’s future economic development plans.

Urban Open Space Context

INDUSTRIAL AND POST-INDUSTRIAL LEGACY

Indeed, Lawrence’s lowest-income neighborhoods—primarily comprised of young Latino families—face a host of additional burdens, especially environmental justice issues; that is, they experience a disproportionate share of burden in terms of vacant, contaminated, underutilized, derelict and illegally dumped-upon land in their neighborhoods compared with those living in even moderately more affluent Lawrence neighborhoods. At present, there are several hundred vacant, underutilized lots spread all across the city of Lawrence, though most are concentrated in Lawrence’s lowest-income neighborhoods. Given Lawrence’s extremely high rates of foreclosure, combined with the fact that development pressures in Lawrence are relatively low, compared with much of the greater Boston region, **open space planning appears to be of strong interest to the community at large, though limited local resources and capacity are factors that have hindered active pursuit of a deliberate citywide vacant lot agenda.**

THE PUBLIC HEALTH DIMENSION

Less often discussed than vacancy and the foreclosure crisis, but equally devastating, is the fact that increasing numbers of Lawrence’s low-income residents are saddled with the overlapping challenges of hunger, food insecurity and their resulting impacts on health and wellness. Already vulnerable to unexpected life events such as sudden illness, job loss, and fluctuations in food or utility prices, along with the neighborhood instability that comes with vacant neighborhood properties, Lawrence’s low-income families have long been facing **higher-than-average diet-related health issues** including Type II diabetes, obesity, and coronary heart disease. As the foreclosure crisis and struggling economy continues to

bear down on society, families are growing even more vulnerable due to their the inability to meet their basic needs, which means they increasingly rely on food stamps, and make cost-driven food consumption choices that negatively impact their health. While bellies may be filled with free or low-cost food, the nutritional value of these foods is extremely low while its cost to health is high—and this crisis is now reaching epidemic proportions. As families continue struggling to make ends meet, the ripple effects of consuming cheap, processed, high-calorie, low-nutrition fast foods will be seen in more frequent emergency room visits, more days out of work and school, and ultimately, shorter life spans, especially among members of our younger generations. **Transformation of vacant land into community gardens provide a promising opportunity to address these intertwined economic and wellness issues while also addressing vacancy challenges.**

Land Trust Strategies

To confront these challenges, Groundwork Lawrence has made a concerted effort to leverage its recent improvements to the built environment with quality **programming designed to encourage the peer-supported discovery, exploration and pursuit of healthier habits, both from a food and fitness perspective.** As a local catalyst, collaborator, and leader improving the public realm and quality of life in Lawrence, MA, Groundwork Lawrence has since 2001 worked arm-in-arm with local government, residents, institutions, and organizations on neighborhood planning and organizing activities, place-based projects, youth and community programming, and economic development and stewardship initiatives. To date, Groundwork Lawrence has managed the design, construction, and/or renovation of over \$6M in public open space projects in cooperation with the City



Groundwork Lawrence facilitated and organized community design charrettes for a new park on the Spicket River. The interactive session created the community design for Dr. Nina Scarito Park.



Dr. Nina Scarito Park was a mothballed brownfield in the city that was transformed into a 2 acre oasis on the Spicket River in 2006.

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Students participate in Groundwork Lawrence's schoolyard gardening program at the Leonard School garden which was installed during adjacent park renovations in 2007.

of Lawrence Community Development Department.

With this new healthy infrastructure in place, over the next five years Groundwork Lawrence aims to leverage these place-based investments with programmatic strategies designed to support the building of residents' basic assets of health and wellness, which will ultimately help beautify neighborhoods and increase residents' ability to thrive and enjoy a better quality of life. By improving the community's most vulnerable low-income residents' health with better food and more physical activity, residents can build their wealth, knowledge, new habits, and a more interconnected community, especially in Lawrence's lowest-income areas. **In 2007, Groundwork Lawrence became a Land Trust in order to help further stabilize underutilized land across Lawrence where vacant properties' best and highest uses are non-residential, nor commercially-oriented.** In spite of and as a partial antidote to the home foreclosure crisis that has spread across neighborhoods in Lawrence, Groundwork Lawrence has pursued public realm projects that are reclaiming vacant, underutilized spaces in our lowest-income areas, while at the same time meeting multiple bottom lines of environment, economy, equity, health. For example, **Groundwork has enhanced Lawrence's livability by pursuing the following projects, programs, and initiatives:**

BROWNFIELD-TO-PARK PROJECTS

Dr. Nina Scarito Park – A 2.7-acre site that stood vacant for nearly twenty years, "the Brook Street site" required six years of persistence to make Scarito Park a reality, as well as hundreds of people and scores of public agencies that were involved in decision-making, problem-solving, and troubleshooting to move the project forward. Throughout this time, Groundwork Lawrence served as the catalyst and manager of the project, helping to coordinate community outreach; environmental investigation and remedial activities; site design and planning; legal and real estate transaction work; fundraising; project permitting; construction; and volunteer involvement. Thanks to the strong commitment and leadership

of City and State officials, neighborhood residents, and Bank of America, Scarito Park is a \$3M investment that stands today as a shining example of the value a beautiful, community-designed open space can bring to a neighborhood. Scarito Park was the first new park to be completed as part of the Spicket River Greenway.

Manchester Street Park – This soon-to-be park was a 5+ acre brownfield that has since 2002 stood as a vacant parcel situated along the banks of Lawrence's Spicket River at Stevens Pond, created in the late 1800s to power the many textile mills still standing in the district today. Envisioned by the community as the capstone park space along the developing Spicket River Greenway, Groundwork Lawrence managed a multi-year community design and strategic planning process to reclaim the site as open space. Plans that emerged from the community-driven process include a new playground, swings, a community garden, a grassy open lawn and picnic space, a parking area, and a portion of the Spicket Trail, as well as a dramatic pavilion overlook perched atop a residual concrete structure adjacent to Stevens Pond. With site cleanup complete and park construction nearly finished as of this writing, a fall 2009 ribbon-cutting is anticipated.

VACANT LAND ENHANCEMENTS

Kennedy Playstead – Long a flood-prone area on the banks of the Spicket River, this site had been inhabited by nearly 20 homes that were condemned and demolished by FEMA in the late 1990s after particularly acute recurring floods wielded hundreds of thousands of dollars in damage to the homes. Located in Lawrence's Arlington Neighborhood, this newly-built park came online in summer 2007 following Groundwork Lawrence's management of three-year negotiations and a lengthy community design process with the City of Lawrence and local stakeholders. The Kennedy Playstead is now home to a new stretch of the Spicket River Greenway trail, and this one-acre park also includes play equipment for 2-5 and 5-12 year olds, benches, trash receptacles, a grassy open field, 16 new trees, dozens of shrubs, and interpretive signage about the river's ecological habitat and the historic development patterns surrounding it.



The CSA brings fresh fruits and vegetables to Lawrence and residents in need can take advantage of subsidized shares through GWL's Share-a-Share Program.

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Misserville Park - Located adjacent to the Leonard School in Lawrence's North Common neighborhood, this newly refurbished city-owned park doubles as the school's playground. Following a design process that engaged the school's students, teachers, and administrators alongside neighborhood residents, Misserville Park includes such amenities as the city's first state-of-the-art skate park designed by local teens, a basketball court, a turf field, the city's first schoolyard garden beds in an outdoor classroom setting, 17 new trees, dozens of shrubs, benches and trash receptacles. As a result of the site's redesign and reconstruction, impervious surfaces were reduced by 33%, allowing more surface water to percolate into the water table rather than compromise the water quality in our rivers.

Union & Mechanic Alleyway Community Garden – An illegally-dumped upon alleyway just over 300 feet long and 14 feet wide, the Union/Mechanic Alleyway stood as a symbol of underutilized and uncared for land in the heart of the city's most challenged North Common neighborhood. By pursuing the alleyway's cleanup with cadres of residents and other volunteers, Groundwork Lawrence set about leading a design process with nearby gardeners who needed a safe space to garden in uncontaminated soils. Using a variety of low-impact development (LID) techniques, Groundwork Lawrence managed several community build events to construct new garden beds, rain gardens, and a permeable patio to at once address neighborhood food insecurity and stormwater flows that were causing marked erosion. Today, the Union/Mechanic Alleyway is owned and maintained by the Groundwork Lawrence Land Trust as a community garden, which is utilized by nearly a dozen resident gardeners.

PLANNING A MORE SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY

The Spicket River Greenway - Our management of behind-the-scenes survey and design work for the Spicket

River Greenway trail, designed to provide bike and pedestrian transportation opportunities for residents (especially youth) traveling to and from school or work, provide for more riverside recreational amenities, and ultimately connect all the green open spaces we've constructed, improved, and/or cared for along the Spicket River since our incorporation in 2001.

Walkable Neighborhoods – Groundwork Lawrence's advocacy for the inclusion of pedestrian-oriented improvements in upcoming Massachusetts Highway Department plans for the East Haverhill Street bridge reconstruction (located within a dangerous North Common neighborhood intersection where vehicular traffic flow and speeds), provides much-needed input for how the community could enhance safety for pedestrians, especially for youth who frequent nearby amenities such as Our House Community Center and Dr. Nina Scarito Park. More broadly, and with an eye towards reclaiming the City's vast network of underutilized alleyways, Groundwork has been exploring opportunities for creating a Safe Routes to Schools program, as well as developing mapped walking loops and interpretive trails across the city that invite residents and visitors to better understand the city's natural habitats, industrial history, and cultural diversity.

Community Garden Network – In 2007, Groundwork Lawrence established itself as a Land Trust and acquired the Union/Mechanic Alleyway, which it developed into its first community garden. Groundwork Lawrence's continued close work with staff members at the City's Planning and Community Development Departments have helped begin to catalyze a community dialogue about the conveyance of other vacant lots with low redevelopment potential to Groundwork Lawrence's Land Trust for the development of a permanent community garden network in neighborhoods across the city.



"Reviviendo" mean rebirth and this mural is in the Union/Mechanic Alleyway Garden, GWL's first land acquisition as a Land Trust. The alleyway now provides fresh vegetables for ten families.



GWL continues to support and manage the city's growing network of community gardens in cooperation with the Planning and Community Development Departments.

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Volunteers during the Spicket River Cleanup in 2007 took advantage of low water levels and tackled the build-up of debris at the mouth of the Spicket at the Merrimack River.

CULTIVATING STEWARDSHIP

Alongside our important project and program work described above, Groundwork Lawrence continues to cultivate broader stewardship of our public spaces, thereby improving and stabilizing Lawrence's neighborhoods. Through its grassroots efforts that engage residents of all ages in hands-on work to clean up vacant lots, alleyways, underutilized spaces and new and existing parks, Groundwork Lawrence is engaging residents in embracing a common sense of purpose for reclaiming our neighborhoods. In keeping with the broken windows theory (as first documented by Kelling and Wilson, the broken windows theory maintains that perceptions of social (dis)order are inextricably linked to the incidence (or lack) of crime and perceptions of safety in neighborhoods), if there is a sense in the neighborhood that someone (or many people) is looking after public spaces, residents tend to feel safer and more empowered to take steps to maintain common spaces, eliminate blight, and call the police to restore order when necessary. **Our civic engagement and stewardship efforts include:**

The Spicket River Cleanup happening each September, and *the Earth Day Cleanup* happening each April, are two flagship community events designed to engage residents in reclaiming public spaces for passive and active recreational use. In addition to periodic street, neighborhood, park, and alleyway cleanups, these large events engage well over 600 people each year in tangible direct service to the community, which yields perceptible beautification in our most challenged neighborhoods, and increase residents' appreciation for our green and open space assets. Our Green Team youth members have been most instrumental in this civic engagement process—for both Cleanup events, the Green Team is responsible for recruiting and signing up their peers from Lawrence High School and Greater Lawrence Vocational High School as volunteers. At the 2008 Spicket River Cleanup

Groundwork is also exploring the possibility of the Groundwork Lawrence Land Trust holding Conservation Restrictions for City-owned vacant lots-turned-community gardens to ensure a long-standing maintenance and oversight stake on these community garden sites.

CATALYZING COMMUNITY WELLNESS

Community Gardening – In our two community gardens (Union/Mechanic Garden and Brook Street Garden) Groundwork Lawrence hosted over 65 individual and/or family community garden members during both the 2007 and 2008 gardening seasons. In providing safe, uncontaminated gardening beds for our members, we are working to encourage greater local food production and wider growth and consumption of fruits and vegetables as a low-cost, healthy alternative to stretching the food budget with fast and/or processed foods. Our third community garden will come online this fall when construction of our Manchester Street Park brownfield-to-open space project (including over a dozen community garden beds) is complete.

Schoolyard Gardening – With the 2007 construction of garden beds at the Leonard School as part of our Misserville Playground reconstruction, we've struck a partnership with school administrators and teachers to begin planning curriculum for engaging middle schoolers attending the Leonard in outdoor classroom activities associated with growing vegetables from seed to harvest. What we've learned is that while adult habits are hard to break, youth habits are easier to encourage if exposure to positive habits happens early enough. Our programming is being designed to dovetail with in-classroom lessons, and will be matched according to age and grade-appropriate State-mandated MCAS frameworks. Next fall our second schoolyard garden will be constructed at Cronin Park, which is utilized as a schoolyard by the adjacent Tarbox Elementary School, where we've begun developing and nurturing relationships with teachers, administrators, students, and the PTA.



GWL works to engage residents of all ages - these young people show off their face paint decorations at the Harvest Festival celebrating the harvest of the Community Gardens.

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alone, 500 students contributed a combined 2,000 volunteer hours towards cleaning up the banks, parks and vacant lots along the Spicket River, resulting in not only the removal of several tons of debris, but a heightened sense of awareness, appreciation, and empowerment about maintaining clean and orderly open spaces in the community and minimizing litter and debris.

Outcomes

Urban land reclamation, maintenance, and stewardship can yield significant positive outcomes. Below is a list of such benefits Groundwork Lawrence has seen and/or anticipates achieving over time through its **transformation and protection of vacant properties**:

- It encourages equitable redevelopment.*** In lower-income areas, development pressure is low; neighborhood-scale visioning for vacant lots meaningfully engages long-marginalized EJ neighborhoods.
- It improves public health and food security.*** Gardens provide low-cost fresh food options, especially in “food deserts”. Residents in poor neighborhoods (where vacant lots are prevalent) face higher rates of diet-related disease.
- It builds community and stewardship.*** Residents get to know each other during design process; provide “eyes” with frequent use of the new space.
- It stabilizes neighborhoods.*** Cleaning up eyesores sends a signal that crime is not welcome, that the neighborhood is cared for, orderly (broken windows theory).
- It demonstrates Best Management Practices.*** Lots reclaimed featuring LID techniques like rain gardens encourage sustainable redevelopment practices.

It makes good economic sense. According to a study conducted at the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School:

- Cleaning and greening of vacant lots can increase adjacent property values by as much as 30%!
- Planting a tree within 50 feet of a house can increase its value by about 9%.
- Location of a house within 1/4 mile from a park increased values by 10%.
- Neighborhood blocks with higher concentrations of unmanaged vacant lots displayed lower house prices, about 18%.



Design option for Manchester Street Park created through the community design process in 2008. The park was completed in 2009 and serves as a capstone of the city’s developing Spicket River Greenway.

Groundwork Lawrence is a member of the **Urban Land Protection Council (ULPC)**, which also includes the Lowell Parks & Conservation Trust, The Greater Worcester Land Trust, and The Waltham Land Trust. **The Jessie B. Cox Charitable Lead Trust** has funded the ULPC to develop and enhance the collaborative efforts of the urban land protection community.



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