

WESTERN HEIGHTS REDEVELOPMENT AND URBAN RENEWAL PLAN



I. INTRODUCTION

The Western Heights neighborhood is strategically located 1.5 miles from downtown Knoxville, the University of Tennessee, and many of the areas top employers and amenities. Unfortunately, disinvestment, physical barriers, residential and commercial vacancies, and concentrated poverty have kept the neighborhood from realizing its potential.

The residents of Western Heights have a collective vision of a safe neighborhood for all, with new housing and programming for children and adults. Beginning in 2020, the leadership of KCDC, the City of Knoxville, Knoxville-Knox County Community Action Committee, and over 65 other partners created a process to solicit community input from residents and stakeholders of the Western Heights community. The result was the Western Heights Transformation Plan published in 2021. This Redevelopment Plan is one of the action steps to implement portions of the community-based plan.

II. COMMUNITY HISTORY

Knoxville College immediately south of the Redevelopment Area was founded in 1875 and became a prominent liberal arts college educating Black students. The area to the north was mainly rural throughout the 19th century and became known as Beaumont (i.e., lovely hill) around 1888. Leon Jourolman, a prominent local attorney, and philanthropist purchased the undeveloped land north of the college in 1893.

Residential development was slowed by a national depression, as well as logistical problems concerning streetcar construction. Water services finally arrived on the steep hilltop and in 1906 an auction of lots was held. The area was instantly popular with factory workers. By then, several important manufacturers were within walking distance. Located just north of the area in Lonsdale was The Knoxville Iron Company, the largest ironworks in East Tennessee.

Located to the east was Brookside Weaving Mills which became one of Knoxville's largest employers. The mill donated land for the expansion of Beaumont Elementary which opened in 1915. Other heavy industries joined the area looking for workers. Chances are that most Beaumont families during the first half of the 20th century included at least one member who was involved in manufacturing. Beaumont was annexed by the City of Knoxville in 1917 and Rule High opened in 1927 eventually becoming a full high school.

The term "Western Heights," a name promoted around 1916 as a modern term for Mechanicsville, was rarely applied to the Beaumont area until the opening of the Western Heights housing development in 1939. It was hailed as "the largest single construction project ever received at City Hall." The 244-unit complex was more than subsidized living. It included new housing, a splash pad, baseball diamond, library, teen club, WPA Adult Education School, Red Cross classes, and a Sunday School. Over the years, those amenities have disappeared. In the 1950s, 444 more units were added to the site.

Most of the Brookside Mills operation, the largest employer in the area, closed in 1956. Other large employment centers like Dempster Brothers and the iron works started winding down operations. In 1971, a community park, wading pool, and softball field were added to the Beaumont neighborhood, but they have since been removed.

Thanks to the establishment of Beaumont Magnet Academy as Knox County's elementary arts magnet program, the area continues to have ties to the arts community yet remains what it was for most of the last 110 years, a modest residential community for working people.

III. WESTERN HEIGHTS TRANSFORMATION PLAN

While the Western Heights neighborhood is strategically located 1.5 miles from downtown Knoxville and the University of Tennessee, featuring some of the area's most beautiful views of the Smoky Mountains and downtown, the disinvestment, physical barriers, residential and commercial vacancies, and concentrated poverty have kept the neighborhood from realizing its potential. Through the leadership of KCDC, the City of Knoxville, Knoxville-Knox County Community Action Committee (CAC), and over 65 other partners, Western Heights will be transformed into a neighborhood of choice for current and future residents.

The transformation planning process, titled Transforming Western, took place over 15 months. Residents interested in joining the planning process were given tablets with cellular connectivity so they could join monthly planning meetings on Zoom. Additionally, nine resident events and five planning sessions provided opportunities for in-person interaction and input. Four Resident Ambassadors worked closely with their fellow residents to ensure everyone was informed and involved in the process.

The residents of Western Heights have a collective vision of a safe neighborhood for all, with new housing, activities, and programming for children and adults, beautiful parks, safe walking paths, and access to healthy and affordable food. This vision resulted in the Transforming Western Heights Transformation Plan and it is incorporated into this redevelopment plan as a reference and guiding resource for KCDC as Exhibit A.

Given the history of the Western Heights area and the existing conditions of blight, the City of Knoxville has identified the area for redevelopment and has determined to incentivize the revitalization of the Redevelopment Area. Knoxville's Community Development Corporation ("KCDC"), as the redevelopment and urban renewal authority of the City, has been asked by the City to assist with this redevelopment effort. KCDC has prepared this plan (the "Plan") and has submitted it as both a redevelopment plan under §13-20-203(B) of the Tennessee Code Annotated and an urban renewal plan under § 13-20-211 of the Tennessee Code Annotated.

IV. PROJECT AREA BOUNDARY AND EXISTING CONDITIONS

The Redevelopment Area is generally bounded on the north by Tennessee Avenue, on the east by I-275, Baxter Avenue on the south, and Western Avenue on the west. The map of

the area that will be subject to this plan (the “Redevelopment Area”) is shown on Exhibit B attached hereto.

The Redevelopment Area clearly is eligible to be a redevelopment project within the meaning of Section 13-20-202(a) of the Tennessee Code Annotated. Based on physical inspections of the area conducted by KCDC, the Redevelopment Area is blighted due to dilapidation of the buildings located within the Redevelopment Area. The redevelopment area also clearly qualifies as an urban renewal project within the meaning of Section 13-20-212(a) of the Tennessee Code Annotated because the area, based upon physical inspection by KCDC, when considered as a whole, is blighted, deteriorated, and deteriorating. Blight is defined as “areas with buildings or improvements which by reason of dilapidation, obsolescence, overcrowding, faulty arrangement or design, lack of ventilation, light, and sanitary facilities, excessive land coverage, deleterious land use, or obsolete layout, or any combination of these or other factors that are detrimental to the safety, health, morals or welfare of the community.”

V. RELATIONSHIP TO LOCAL OBJECTIVES

Appropriate Land Uses

As described in more detail in the Transformation plan, a wider range of land uses should be encouraged in the Redevelopment Area. Neighborhood mixed use, open space, and neighborhood residential are all appropriate land uses within the Redevelopment Area. Proposed improvements include housing upgrades, open spaces, and mixed-use buildings that will provide additional retail space in the area.

Improved Traffic and Public Transportation

As described in the Transformation Plan, improved walking and biking routes, and increased transportation options for youth and adults are needed. Upgrades include sidewalks, wider streets, and the addition of off-street parking in some areas.

The Redevelopment Area is presently served by all major public utilities. It is likely, however, that some utility improvements may be required to meet the demands of newly renovated or developed structures.

Recreational and Community Facilities

The residents identified the need for parks and spaces to enjoy being outdoors in the beautiful Western Heights setting. The steep hills in Western Heights make the existing spaces unusable. Residents want to walk with their children and friends, gather for social events in park spaces, and enjoy amenities that serve young children, older children, teens, and adults. Upgrades include creating linkages between the neighborhood and Malcom Martin Park to the south and Expanding the Boys & Girls Club in the heart of the community.

VI. REDEVELOPMENT PLAN OBJECTIVES

The Western Heights Transformation Plan sets forth primary objectives to be accomplished throughout the area. Without limiting the objectives set forth in said plan, this Redevelopment Plan is intended to support those objectives and accomplish the following:

- a) Eliminate conditions of blight and blighting influences, incompatible and inappropriate land uses, and assist in beautifying the area.
- b) Encourage effective and desirable uses of land in accordance with the Transformation Plan, including, but not limited to better utilization of vacant and underutilized land for the addition of open spaces, housing development, mixed use development, and improved pedestrian access.
- c) Facilitate opportunities for more mixed-use development, including a functional blend of residential, commercial, retail, institutional, community, cultural, and industrial uses within the same area. These areas would be connected by pedestrian and multi-modal transportation options. This plan will create more variety in housing types, reduce distance between home, workplace, shopping, and other destinations, increase density, strengthen the neighborhood's character, and promote bicycling and pedestrian mobility.
- d) Facilitate improvements to the sidewalk, bicycle and street systems, including standards for on-and off-street parking, fostering greater intensity in development and providing improved access to new and existing businesses. Such public improvements may also include improved lighting and improved access to existing public improvements.
- e) Facilitate improvements to parks and open spaces, including, but not limited to, parks, splashpad, playgrounds, community gardens, urban plazas, grassy lawns, tree-lined streets, and picnic tables.
- f) Increase housing opportunities for working families.

VII. LAND ACQUISITION AND DISPOSITION PLAN

KCDC may acquire property under this Plan to become a part of a redevelopment project to facilitate affordable housing development or planned development benefiting the community. Acquisition priorities include:

- a) Properties that are delinquent on property taxes.
- a) Properties that are subject to code violations.
- b) Properties that are considered vacant and abandoned property.
- c) Properties that would form a part of a contiguous or scattered land assemblage for a larger development.
- d) Properties that will result in planned development that benefits the community.
- e) Properties that will increase the number of affordable housing units.

Voluntary sales shall be the goal of all acquisitions. However, if eminent domain is required, KCDC shall comply with state law and KCDC acquisition policies.

Properties acquired by KCDC shall be disposed of in accordance with state law and specifically Tennessee Code Annotated Section 13-20-204 and 13-20-210. As provided in those statutes, KCDC may dispose of any acquired property at such value as KCDC determines such property should be made available in order that it may be redeveloped for the purposes set forth in this Plan. Any such disposition will be made subject to such restrictions and covenants as KCDC deems necessary to:

- a) ensure completion of the redevelopment project after the transfer,
- b) maintain the quality of the Redevelopment Area, and
- c) ensure the continued maintenance of the properties in the area.

VIII. LAND USE PLAN

Knoxville-Knox County Planning (Planning) was established in 1956 by Knoxville and Knox County as the agency responsible for comprehensive county-wide planning and administration of land subdivision regulations. Planning has designated three primary use zones within the Western Heights Redevelopment Plan, and these zones should be able to meet most of the needs of the Plan.

- a) Neighborhood Mixed Use Center (MU-NC) is a low intensity mixed use district typically located at an intersection of a local street and thoroughfare. The buildings should be designed with a residential character and scale to complement the surrounding neighborhood.
- b) Medium Density Residential (MDR) designation is primarily a residential zone with densities from 6 to 24 dwelling units per acre.
- c) Traditional Neighborhood Residential (TDR) designation is primarily residential and is characterized by neighborhoods where a mix of detached and attached houses, sidewalks, smaller lots, and alleys have typically been or are to be created. Densities in the range of 4 to 8 units per acre are typical.

IX. PLAN AMENDMENTS AND TERMINATION

During implementation of this plan, amendments may be warranted. Any amendments to this plan will only be adopted by City Council after a public hearing is conducted in the same manner as the hearing conducted prior to the adoption of this plan and, where applicable, in compliance with the requirements of Tennessee Code Annotated Section 13-20-205. Notice of proposed amendments will be given to all property owners within the project area pursuant to the requirements of state law. If County Commission's approval of any amendment is required by state law, such approval will also be requested. This plan, and the provisions thereof, shall terminate on the date that is the later of (a) the date that no tax increment financing remains

outstanding with respect to any portion of the redevelopment area or (b) twenty (20) years from the commencement of the Allocation Period hereunder.

X. SEVERABILITY

The invalidation of any or more of the foregoing provisions of this Redevelopment Plan, as approved by the Council of the City of Knoxville, or any part thereof by judgment of any Court of competent jurisdiction, shall not in any way effect the validity of any other such provisions of the Plan, but the same shall remain in full force and effect.