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Betty Lane has seen a lot in forty years as Larimer resident. At seventy-five, her mind holds a mental map of the neighborhood; she can tell you that there was once a German church that stood on the corner of Paulson and Carver streets and that there was an Italian-American social club on Larimer Avenue.

These things are long gone.

When she moved to Larimer in 1970, the neighborhood was predominantly Italian-American with a few German-American families sprinkled in. Racial tensions sprang forth as African-Americans began moving in from various parts of Pittsburgh, due to URA legislation that would allow low-income families to move into affordable housing. As the neighborhood demographics began to change, boundaries were made clear. Little socialization was made between the two groups.

"The White folks just looked like they hated us," Betty says "As African-Americans started moving in, Italians started moving out."

The neighborhood was vastly changing. While it had been anything but pristine in its heyday, by the early 1980's Larimer had earned a reputation as a dangerous neighborhood affected by drugs and gang warfare. By the late 1990s, the violence had slowed but the economic decline of the neighborhood continued. What was once a neighborhood that beamed with Queen Anne Style houses and brick bungalow's dating from the 19th century had mostly fallen into ruin. Vacant homes and dilapidated properties now line streets named for bygone eras: Meadow, Shetland, and Turret. Glass litters sidewalks and graffiti leaves an angry scar over garage doors. At the intersection of Meadow and Turret Streets, the former Our Lady of Help Church built in 1900, stands desolate without its stained glass or saintly statues welcoming the community.

It's not any semblance of a ghost town but Larimer's population had devastatingly fallen from 13,338 in 1940 to just 2,602 in 2000 (Unknown). Thirteen years later, there's a little more than 1,700 people that live in the area (Bankston, 2013).

- *Larimer was named after General William Larimer, Jr. who was born in Westmoreland County and made his fortune in the Railroad industry. In the 1800's Larimer had a manor house that used to sit on what is now Larimer Avenue. He would later go on to found the city of Denver, Colorado.*
- *The neighborhood was settled first by German immigrants and then Italian immigrants.*
- *When it was first opened, the Kingsley Association served as a settlement house for these newly arrived immigrants.*
- *Our Lady of Help Christian Church in the distance.*
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- *Neglected Armstrong Way*

What seems to be the very model of urban decay, however, is not entirely hopeless. Betty and a few others in the community know that it isn't. It's her memories of a beautiful and bustling neighborhood that keep her active and is why she is a member of the Larimer Consensus Group—an organization that seeks to make the community vibrant again. With the backing of the Kingsley Association—an organization that has been present in the community since 1919 (About The Kingsley Association)—a plan to make the neighborhood an example of sustainability, was unveiled by the LCG in 2010.

The Larimer Vision Plan seeks to provide the community with more energy efficient homes and structures, an urban farm, a brand new park, and green space—something that the neighborhood is currently lacking, over the next twenty years. It also plans to provide better storm drainage systems for residents (Larimer Consensus Group, 2010). Overall, the plan aims to change the reputation that Larimer has held in Pittsburgh for the past forty years as an unsafe and economically depressed neighborhood.

However, while many of these features seem appealing and pointing the neighborhood towards a renaissance, some residents are not totally sold. As a member of the Larimer Vision to Action Survey Team, Aurelia Carter-Scott has encountered many residents who are worried that they may be forced to give up their homes.

"Many of the residents have really been concerned that they are not being told the truth about what's going to happen in the neighborhood," she says. "They also feel that when the development starts, some will be forced out of the neighborhood."

Displacement is all too common a fear among communities of African-Americans. Historically, African-American populations have not been taken into consideration during urban revitalization projects. One way that the Larimer Vision Project says that it will ensure that residents are not being forced out due to an increase in real estate and property values or the demolition of homes on projected development sites, is by offering residents "a house for a house." The plan envisions being able to provide homes for homeowners or renters that decide to move due to development purposes but would like to stay in the neighborhood. (Larimer Consensus Group, 2010).

Aside from being fears of being forced out, some residents are also concerned that the new additions to the neighborhood are not necessarily being added for their benefit. The recent development of Bakery Square, a chic urban shopping center, on the site of the old Nabisco Bakery along the northern end of Penn Avenue, also has some residents on edge. It's not that they don't want revitalization; they simply want to be included. Residents are hoping that the Larimer Vision Plan will take the needs of current residents into consideration. However, some residents such as Betty Lane are not so sure.

"They want to do walking trails and bike trails...that speaks to a certain population," she says, "I have an issue with saying but not saying who you are trying to attract." Betty believes that the plan must take youth and children into consideration by providing more recreational areas (Lane, 2013)

Malik Bankston, the Executive Director of the Kingsley Center, member of the Larimer Consensus group, and longtime resident assures that the LVP is looking out for the best interest of longtime residents while also opening up the door and opportunity for newcomers.

"The[Larimer] vision plan is just that, " says Bankston, "It is an attempt on our part of what it [Larimer] could be long term...it's our best thinking about what we think tomorrow's sustainable community looks like."

However, he acknowledges that in order for the community to rebound, it will have to be a place that is comprised of mixed socio-economic backgrounds. In 2009, the median household income for Larimer residents was \$25,600 a year compared to a median income \$37,461 for the regional average (Larimer Neighborhood in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 15206 detailed profile).

"...You cannot have a neighborhood that is made up entirely of poor people," Bankston says, "You have to be able to attract a diverse range of people to be an economically sound neighborhood."

Despite the Larimer Vision Plan requiring the next step of implementing action, the process of rebuilding and revitalization has already begun. Vacant and neglected homes are among the first to fall. The little convent house of Our Lady of Help was among them; all that remains is the stone wall that surrounded the walkway. The historic Larimer School, on Larimer Avenue, with its Greco-Roman frescoes and columns, still stands as a reminder that once upon a time there were enough children in the neighborhood to fill its halls. Hardly any businesses remain along the corridor that was known for its many bakeries, bars, and Italian food stores.

Nothing can recreate the glory days of this neighborhood, but in the inevitable changing landscape surrounding them, Larimer residents are hopeful that the projects developers will be mindful of the historical significance and character of the nearly 200-year-old neighborhood.

"I hope that it [the Larimer Vision Plan] will impact in a way that the neighborhood will become more vibrant again," says Aurelia Carter-Scott "but I hope that the people who have been here for a long time will reap the benefits of staying in their own homes."

While Betty Lane has mixed feelings about the plan and what will happen to the community as a result, she says she supports it.

"I am for the plan," she says "I hope that the community would become a community and not a 'hood and that there would be some feeling that it belongs to them. I hope that it becomes a community in every sense of the word."

For more information please visit:

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