

Doing Sociology

Case Studies in Sociological Practice

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CHAPTER 8

Community Research Tactics and Social Change

ASSESSING NEEDS AND ASSETS IN AN INNER CITY NEIGHBORHOOD

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In the following pages, we will outline an extensive needs and assets assessment of a targeted area of East Jacksonville, Florida. Our chapter, serves as both a case study of how the sociological practitioner can contribute to community development efforts, and also represents the report we provided to our clients. This study was carried out by the Northeast Florida Center for Community Initiatives (CCI) as part of a collaborative effort with FreshMinistries, Inc., of Jacksonville, funded as part of the Compassionate Capital grant program of the Federal government. FreshMinistries describes itself as “an interfaith nonprofit organization working to improve people’s lives and bring hope to those living in distressed conditions” (www.freshministries.org). This project included extensive data collection efforts, meetings with community residents, service providers, and FreshMinistries staff, as well as qualitative field work by CCI staff. While there were a number of obstacles and hurdles to overcome (discussed later in more detail), we believe that the information presented here can serve as a foundation from which on-going efforts focusing on the East Jacksonville Core neighborhood can be developed.

As a “snap-shot” of the community, the report we developed provides a wealth of data and information that may already be known to the Jacksonville community, but that has not been synthesized to be used in a coherent plan of action. It is our hope that the information we provided and which is related in this chapter will be used to spur action—an issue raised by a large number of informants in the study—and not merely relegated to a bookshelf to accumulate dust. Indeed, CCI is dedicated to working with the community members and

FreshMinistries to use this information to bring about positive change for East Jacksonville.

Research Design and Methods

Between January 2007 and July 2007, research team members from CCI built an extensive and diverse data set on which our report was, incorporating quantitative, qualitative, and archival data collection strategies. These strategies included:

- Conducting a “windshield” survey to develop a community physical profile.
- Participating in community resident dialogue/town hall meetings.
- Conducting community resident surveys and focus groups.
- Conducting interviews and focus groups with service providers, educators, religious leaders and other officials.
- Developing an economic and social indicators database, including data from the US Census Bureau, Duval County Health Department, Police Department, educational sources, quality of life indicators, and others sources.

A Demographic Picture of East Jacksonville Core

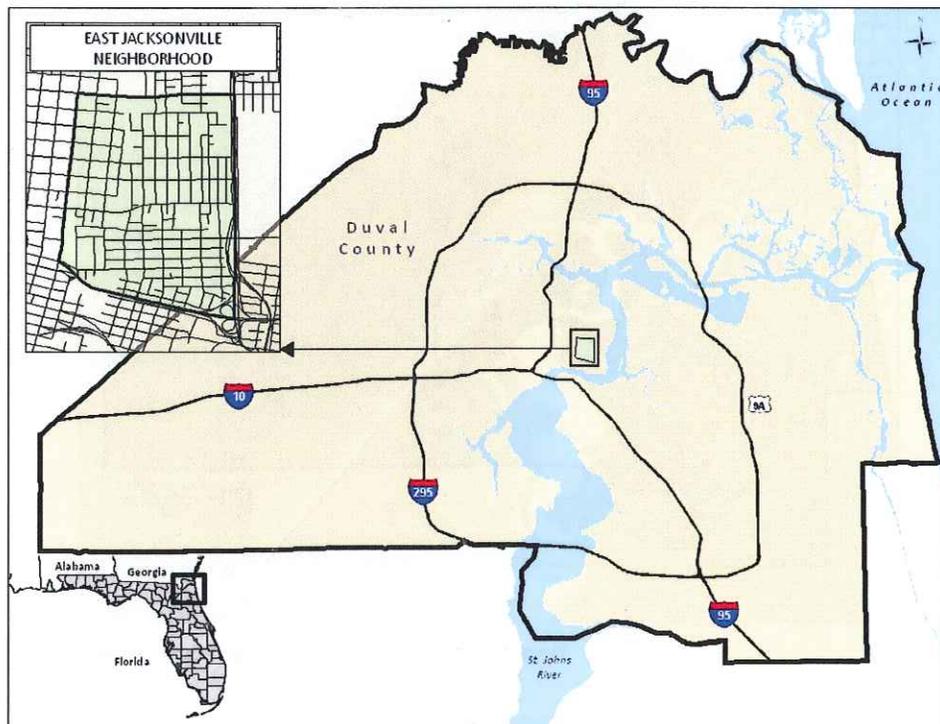
WINDSHIELD SURVEY

A windshield survey, as the name implies, allows for data to be gathered about the physical neighborhood through observation, usually through a car windshield. It can also be conducted when walking through a neighborhood. The results of this survey were then combined with other geographic data collected primarily from the 2006 property appraiser database of the City of Jacksonville and secondarily from the 2000 U.S. Census, 2000–2006 Supervisor of Elections data and 2007 crime data from the Sheriff’s Office. These data sources help to put the windshield survey into context through a comprehensive examination of the neighborhood. First, however, a general look at the neighborhood will help acquaint the reader with the geographic area being discussed.

As of 2002, there were 206 neighborhoods defined by the city of Jacksonville, which cover virtually all of the developable land in Duval County. While most of these neighborhoods have names derived from the main road or waterway that runs through them or by the key subdivision that dominates them,

a few have names based on their geographic location in relation to downtown Jacksonville. For instance, as their names imply, mid-Westside is located west and slightly North of downtown, Midtown is located directly east of downtown, and the Southside neighborhood is located directly south and across the St. Johns River from downtown. Included in this group is the neighborhood of East Jacksonville, which is located east and slightly North of downtown. The East Jacksonville neighborhood, commonly referred to as “East Jax,” has boundaries that extend from 8th Street on the North, the St. Johns River on the East, the Arlington Expressway to the South, and a somewhat ambiguous West boundary that falls on an old line of railroad train tracks (see MAP I; this map is available in color at www.unf.edu/coas/cci/publications.htm). The tracks—or at least what is left of them—are located in the Ionia St./Spearing St. corridor.

As detailed by the 2000 U.S. Census, the five tracts that make up the East Jacksonville Core neighborhood¹ have a population that is almost 75 percent African-American. Independently, these tracts range from 94.5 percent (tract four) to 65.5 percent (tract 10). This predominately African-American neighborhood is statistically quite different from Duval County where 65.8 percent of



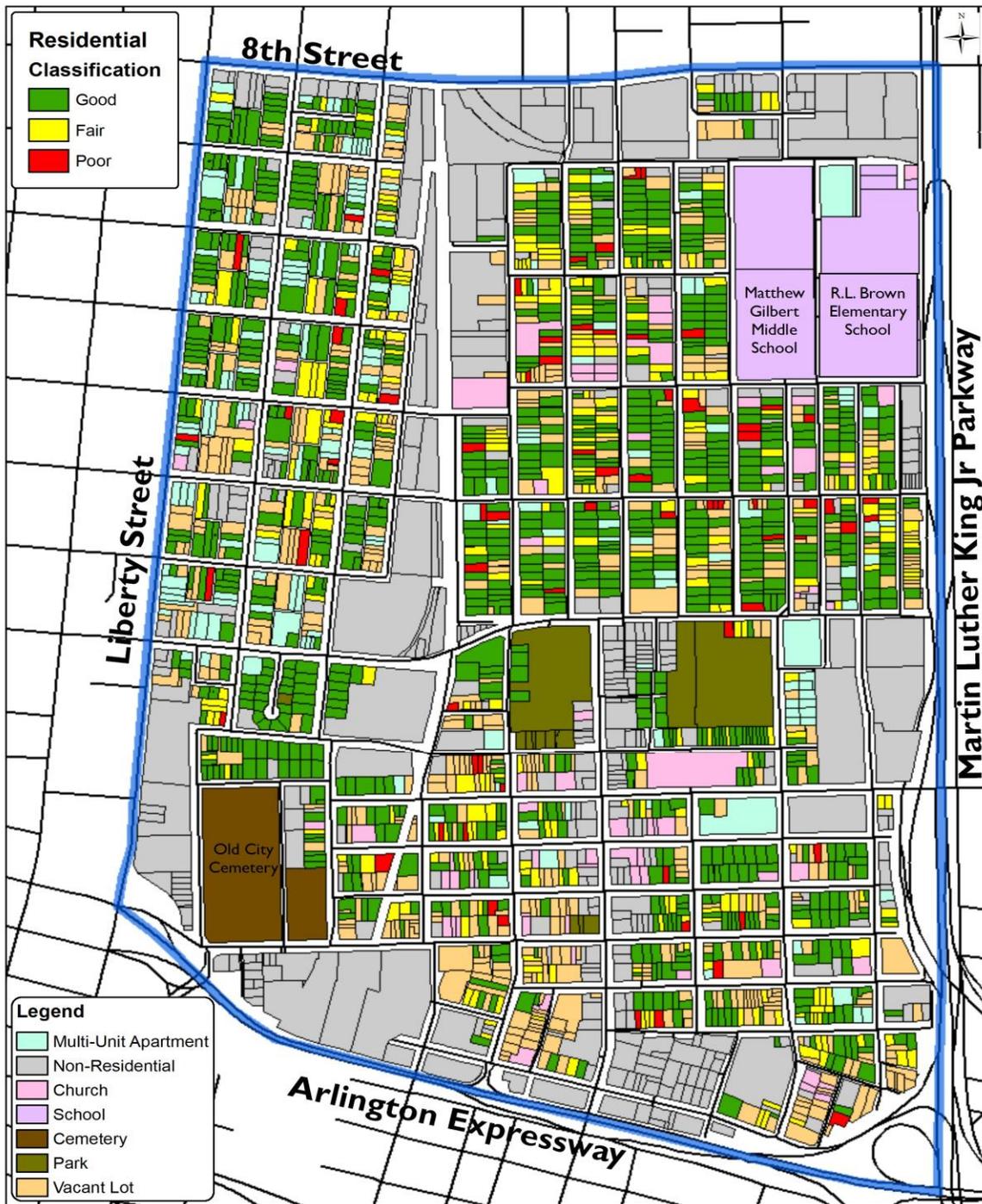
Map 1. The East Jacksonville Neighborhood
Source: City of Jacksonville, FreshMinistries

residents are white. While these numbers essentially show the majority race to be African-American in the East Jacksonville Core and white for Duval County, the numbers of non-African-American minorities are, for all intents and purposes, equal. Duval County has a 6.4 percent rate; while the core neighborhood also has a 6.4 percent rate overall. Within tracts, the percents range from 1.2 to 14 percent.

In Duval County as a whole, a majority of households (71.1 percent) with children under 18 are headed by married couples. Only 22.5 percent of these households are headed by unmarried women, and 6.4 percent by unmarried men. In the East Jacksonville Core neighborhood, however, the percentage for married and female headed households with children under 18 is almost completely opposite. Overall, the core has a 56.4 percent unmarried women rate and a 35.8 percent married headed household rate. In Duval County, the median household income in 1999 was \$40,703. In the East Jacksonville Core neighborhood, the median household income ranged from a low of \$7,857 to \$27,446. Duval County has a poverty rate of 11.9 percent, while the East Jacksonville Core neighborhood has rates that are three and four times that.

It was clear from the data gathered that the residential structures in East Jacksonville Core neighborhood are, on the whole, much older than we find in much of the rest of the city. Residences in the area are also much smaller and are located on undersized lots compared to those found in Duval County overall. In addition, a review of property use codes and the windshield survey indicate a number of vacant buildings, closed businesses, and a significant number of residences that are in only fair or poor condition. Map 2 below (available in color at www.unf.edu/coas/cci/publications.htm) displays some of the results from the windshield survey, illustrating the conditions of both types of residential and the non-residential parcels. As one can see, the perimeter of the neighborhood contains mostly "good" parcels, while the "fair" and "bad" parcels are located on the interior of the core neighborhood. There are very few "new construction" sites in the core area. Given that most of the housing was built in the pre-WWII era, this is not a surprising picture. The lack of recent building represents an important area of focus for core neighborhood improvement efforts as the potential impact of such new construction on the overall neighborhood could improve resident quality of life through jobs, increased property values, and retail store attraction.

With the data that were available, we were able to locate where police responded to incidents and subsequently made arrests within the core neighborhood from 2001 through the first half of 2007. Several important points need to be made about the distribution of incidents and arrests in the core neighborhood. First, it is important to note that there appears to be little variation on the number and distribution of incidents across years since 2001. Indeed, the police



Map 2. All Property Classification within the East Jacksonville Core
Notes: For apartments or businesses with multiple buildings, the overall condition was given. See Methods for property grade classifications.
 Source: Windshield Survey Database, Jacksonville Property Appraiser

are quite busy in the neighborhood, and there appears to be little easing in the number of calls despite efforts by community leaders and authorities. Second, although spread throughout the core neighborhood, there are several areas where there appear to be significant concentrations of arrests and incidents. Most noticeable are the large number reported around the schools and areas in the far south where a number of abandoned buildings and vacant lots are located.

Perceptions and Experiences of East Jacksonville Core Residents

TELEPHONE SURVEY

As part of the needs and assets assessment, the University of North Florida Polling Lab, in conjunction with CCI, conducted a telephone survey with adult residents of the East Jacksonville Core neighborhood in April 2007. The goal of the survey was to gather opinions of neighborhood residents regarding a few specific topics including the general quality of the neighborhood, public services, safety, education, and the family learning environment. The UNF Polling Lab was able to obtain 103 completed surveys, a 19 percent response rate.

The telephone survey provided the research team and other stakeholders a perspective of the East Jacksonville Core neighborhood on a number of topics and issues. The telephone sample of residents was demographically similar to the overall neighborhood, supporting the validity of the respondents' responses. For instance, while there was a higher percentage of female survey respondents compared to the overall neighborhood, the distribution of age, employment, and income were comparable between the two groups.

The ratings of the neighborhood and various neighborhood services such as public schools and neighborhood businesses were split with approximately half reporting them to be excellent and good and the other half rating them as fair or poor. The large majority of respondents tended to perceive these services as good or fair. There was strong consensus concerning the number and quality of jobs available in the neighborhood with many of the resident respondents rating each of these aspects of neighborhood jobs as poor.

While a majority of the resident respondents reported being afraid to walk alone at night in particular areas around their home, nearly all of the respondents felt safe and secure at night while in their home. Many of the surveyed residents rated public safety services such as rescue, fire, and the police as excellent or good, but were split in regards to the police working with people in their neighborhood to solve problems. Responses were also divided for rating public

spaces such as streets and parks. Many of the residents surveyed believed that the removal of trash in the neighborhood is fair or poor.

A number of assets were discovered through the questions concerning health and the family environment. For example, many of the survey respondents claimed to always have access to health care services for themselves and their children. In addition to health care, children residing in the households surveyed also tend to receive parental homework assistance and frequently visit the library. Approximately half of the households represented in the telephone survey also had access to a working computer, access to the internet, and owned more than 50 books. Furthermore, slightly more than half of the resident respondents had volunteered their time within the past six months to help at a local agency such as a school, church, or community organization.

Arguably, the most promising asset gleaned from the telephone survey is that a majority of those surveyed felt that people like themselves can have a big or moderate impact in making their community a better place to live. Such a response indicates a hope and promise within many of the residents that can be harnessed to improve the neighborhood. The challenge will be to get residents of all statuses and in all stages of life to take a stake in shaping the future of their neighborhood.

COMMUNITY MEETINGS OBSERVATIONS

One of the initiatives FreshMinistries has already begun in the East Jacksonville Core neighborhood includes organizing and coordinating monthly community meetings every fourth Thursday evening. According to FreshMinistries staff, the meetings have been organized for and are advertised to the residents in the East Jacksonville Core neighborhood that was defined for the needs and assets assessment. The community meetings are intended to be a forum for community residents to voice their concerns about issues in the neighborhood. In addition, these meetings provide opportunities for residents to discuss ideas and actions to be taken to solve issues thus identified and for FreshMinistries to distribute information on resources available that would assist in such actions. The meeting attendees are also involved in a number of neighborhood events sponsored by FreshMinistries. Given the purpose and nature of the community meetings, the Center for Community Initiatives (CCI) decided that these gatherings would provide valuable information for the needs and assets assessment.

Those attending the meetings during CCI's period of observation were current and past community residents, pastors, as well as representatives (or invited speakers) from the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office (JSO), City Code Enforcement, and other local service agencies or businesses. The number of residents attending

the meetings varied, ranging anywhere from only three to approximately 30. Crime-related issues were often discussed at the community meetings. Meeting attendees complained about drug-related activities, loitering, prostitution, and the lack of police enforcement. The JSO officer listened to the complaints and concerns of residents, explained actions that should take place in regards to specific complaints, and shared what the police department is doing within the neighborhood. The JSO representative requested residents to call in criminal activity, explaining that calls can be anonymous. Despite the promise of anonymity, residents expressed frustration that their identities are not always kept confidential and consequently fear retaliation from the perpetrators they may report.

Another common topic of discussion at the meetings over the seven-month observation period concerned problems associated with abandoned houses and the lack of trash collection. Residents were not only concerned that the abandoned houses were eyesores in the neighborhood, but that they were being used for illegal activities. Unkempt shrubs and streetlights were also brought up as being unsightly and providing criminals with a means of concealing their activities. Another housing-related complaint made by residents entailed defective siding on some of the neighborhood low cost homes.

There was also a number of Fresh Ministries-sponsored neighborhood events that community meeting attendees were encouraged to assist coordinate and/or attend. For example, a spelling bee was arranged for the students of a neighborhood school and volunteers were required to help make the event a success. FreshMinistries staff also attempted to recruit volunteers to arrange a community festival.

FOCUS GROUPS AND INTERVIEWS

Conducting interviews and focus groups with a variety of residents afforded the research team the opportunity to obtain a comprehensive perspective of residents in East Jacksonville Core neighborhood. It was almost unanimous that safety concerns (crime, drugs, etc.) are major issues confronting the community. Many of the discussions centered on drug-related crimes and fear of reporting criminal activity. Problems with neighborhood youth were also thought to be of concern for many. There was general consensus that proper parenting is at the root of a lot of these problems. The prevalence of teen pregnancy and young parenthood were some specific issues expressed by many respondents. Other top needs and issues of East Jacksonville Core neighborhood residents included education, employment, housing, and health.

In general, most of the interviewees were aware of some services and programs in their area. By far, respondents expressed a desire for services and activi-

ties aimed at neighborhood youth the most. This need is particularly evident at the local library where a relatively large number of children hang out after school. While library staff offer some structured activities for the children, these children need more space and assistance than the library can accommodate.

Fear of being pushed out of the neighborhood was another theme found in some of the interviews and focus groups. This fear emerged in discussions regarding both housing and education. While the general consensus was that the new construction and renovation occurring in the community were promising, some were afraid that these changes would displace many of the poorer residents. Respondents also expressed concerns that the neighborhood children are being pushed out of their neighborhood. They reported that instead of attending the neighborhood schools, they are bussed to schools outside of their neighborhood.

While respondents generally struggled in finding an asset within the neighborhood, a number of strengths emerged from the discussions. The residents themselves were identified as being an asset to the neighborhood. Their resiliency and compassion for one another were perceived as a positive foundation from which neighborhood improvements can grow. Other assets acknowledged by respondents included the numerous churches and specific programs within the neighborhood, and recent home restoration and construction.

One of the common themes resonating throughout almost every interview was the passion and commitment of the interviewees to improve the quality of life of the population they served. It was also routine that they used their own money and resources to help others. It is their dedication that provides hope that the neighborhood can grow and prosper in the near future.

Summary

In the previous pages, we have presented the results of an extensive Needs and Assets Assessment of the East Jacksonville Core Neighborhood. As discussed, there are a number of problems facing this neighborhood, which was not surprising. There are also, however, a significant number of assets in the neighborhood, including a core group of citizens, pastors, and service providers, who are intent on making things better. This finding was, in many ways, not so much expected. East Jacksonville is often described as “the worst” neighborhood in the city, and little attention has been paid to those assets in the past.

There are some serious issues facing the East Jacksonville Core neighborhood. The residential structures are quite old, and many are in fair or poor condition. Many are small houses and are appraised at significantly lower rates than much of the rest of Duval County. On the other hand, there are areas of

the neighborhood that are in much better condition than many in Jacksonville would have suggested. These “promising pockets” represent an important asset for the neighborhood, and a resource to build improvements around in the future.

Similarly, the business infrastructure of the neighborhood is also in serious disrepair, with many vacant buildings and vacant lots, and little in the way of economic opportunity for those living in the community. Again, however, there is some optimism in that, while vacant, some of these business properties could provide the base for a renewal of the local economy in the neighborhood, without the dislocation of residents so often accompanying urban renewal and development. Combined with the few all ready established businesses, this represents a great opportunity for growth.

As is confirmed by media portrayals, and responses from focus groups and interviews, there is significant crime and police action within the core neighborhood area. And, this activity has been consistent for a number of years. While some efforts have been successful in dealing with the criminality, it is clear that significant work remains.

The community meetings were observed by CCI staff during a time of organization and development. Like many grassroots initiatives, it takes time and persistence for such efforts to take root and flourish. FreshMinistries staff used various incentives to entice residents to the table and brought a wide variety of agencies to showcase available resources and ways residents can get involved in their community.

It is clear from the community meetings that the residents of the East Jacksonville Core neighborhood face a myriad of challenges. However, the presence of City agencies, such as Jacksonville Sheriff’s Office and Code Enforcement, illustrates a commitment from the City to assist the residents in the neighborhood. The motivation and energy elicited from the neighborhood residents can be seen as possible strengths in the area when developing approaches to address issues more central to the target neighborhood. Continued residential and City involvement will foster a working relationship in which significant progress in addressing the issues facing the neighborhood will become possible.

Recommendations

As we presented in our report, while there are a number of areas which it may not be realistic to recommend action—or which may be outside the abilities of FreshMinistries or CCI to act upon—the findings from this Needs and Assets Assessment do provide information that suggests a number of ways and areas in which action can be taken. Many of these recommendations are taken directly

from the community residents interviewed for this study, while others are based on their reflections. These recommendations include:

- Create collaborative efforts to provide additional/focused organized youth sports.
- Work to re-deploy the Police Athletic League (PAL) facility in the core neighborhood.
- Extend Library availability.
- Increase pressure on the city to address garbage and crime issues.
- Draw upon broader community service resources.
- Development of a Community Action Group (CAG).
- Facilitate the introduction of other community service efforts.
- Create economic opportunity through existing infrastructure and assets.

There are a number of other activities, for example a “Clean up the Neighborhood Day,” campus visits and college application support, or parenting support classes, which can also be suggested. But the primary concern here is that the recommendations above be implemented to empower the neighborhood residents. Throughout the interviews and focus groups, it was clear that the residents, and community leaders, were not looking for “outsiders” to come in and take charge, but for the resources and opportunities to be available to, in the words of a former community leader in the area, “give a hand up not a hand out.” To that end, perhaps the most important recommendation that we offer is that FreshMinistries (and CCI) *NOT* abandon the neighborhood—as so many of the residents interviewed were sure would happen. Action around the recommendations above will go a long way to both build up the neighborhood, as well as to bring together people from across the broader Jacksonville Community.

Postscript

A year after our report was compiled, the CCI research team reconnected with FreshMinistries staff members to obtain an update on their progress within the East Jacksonville Core neighborhood, particularly with regard to the project recommendations. Of particular interest were the recommendations to: 1) Develop a Community Action Group (CAG); 2) Work to redeploy the Police Athletic League facility in the neighborhood; 3) Draw upon broader community resources, services and agencies to serve the neighborhood; and 4) Expand on economic development using existing infrastructure and assets. While the follow-up conversations found that not all of the recommendations had been acted upon, significant progress was, and continues to be, found in the neighborhood.

Although the neighborhood association in which meetings were observed for the research project has not formally created a CAG as was recommended in the report, the Eastside Neighborhood Alliance has become more organized in recent months according to FreshMinistries staff. For instance, officers have been elected by the local residents. Subsequently, these elected officers have taken on more responsibility for the group and some of them have attended a Weed and Seed training to assist them in carrying out their roles. In addition, the Alliance has been successful on a number of occasions in collectively voicing their needs and desires for their community to governmental officials and local agencies.

For example, the residents expressed their concerns over a proposed apartment complex slated for their community to their city council representative. The representative was originally in favor of the project, but changed his position based on the residents' fears that the complex was too large for the proposed parcel and that the anticipated rent was not affordable, leaving the apartments vulnerable to the market and becoming Section 8 housing. The development of the apartment complex has not proceeded at this point. Members of the Alliance have also been active in representing their community in regards to a nearby contaminated site that has been mandated by the EPA to be cleaned. They have attended meetings and collaborated with the Eastside Environmental Council to ensure that the cleanup is done to their satisfaction to protect the health and safety of the residents and that the community will benefit from any proceeds produced from the process.

The Eastside Neighborhood Alliance has further operated as a CAG by communicating their needs to neighborhood service agencies. Over the past summer, the neighborhood Police Athletic League (PAL) renovated and added additional space, including room for a computer lab, to its facilities. PAL currently provides an after school program and is in the process of restoring the fields in order to offer organized sports for the neighborhood youth. While the renovations were already planned for the facilities, the Alliance was instrumental in getting the sports programs included in the plans. The Alliance invited PAL to a community meeting where residents were able to express their needs and desires, one of which was for sports programs to be available to the neighborhood youth, particularly older youth. It is interesting to note that when CCI was conducting the research, PAL personnel were not able to be reached to set up interviews even after several attempts. Recent attempts to contact PAL, however, have resulted in a quick response, indicating a greater presence in the neighborhood.

Significant effort has also been made to draw upon broader community service resources in the neighborhood, another recommendation presented in the original report. In addition to the work with PAL, a number of other efforts by the East Jacksonville Community Resource Center were also mentioned

by FreshMinistries staff in the follow-up conversations. For instance, the staff indicated that the group was working on partnerships with Northeast Florida Community Action (NEFCA) to be able to refer clients to NEFCA services, and they were working with the Department of Children and Families (DCCF) to be a Family Support Service Neighborhood Center. Additionally, several other groups have stepped up to provide some financial support for efforts in the neighborhood. The Jaguar Foundation (created by the owners of the Jacksonville Jaguars, the National Football League team in Jacksonville) provided funds to work with 38 youth in job preparation and employment opportunities. In addition, Comcast Cable and local supermarket chain, Winn Dixie, have also provided funds for supplies and materials used by the community group. The Center is also working on developing a relationship with Florida Community College of Jacksonville (FCCJ).

The one area in which FreshMinistries has still not made significant movement is the creation economic opportunity through existing infrastructure and assets in the neighborhood. While they are still working on providing more needed services and resources, it is clear that more space is needed to provide these services. The existing infrastructure, particularly the storefront area in the southern most region of the neighborhood, has as not yet been tapped for that space. At this writing, however, expansion of the efforts is uncertain. With the economic decline of the current period, the resources such expansion requires are not expected anytime soon.

It is clear that while not all of the projects FreshMinistries has set out to accomplish have been implemented, and that not all of our recommendations have been realized, FreshMinistries has indeed remained quite active within the community. This is particularly important, given the fears expressed by a number of community residents during the interviews and focus groups that 1) the research would have little impact on what FreshMinistries would do, and 2) that regardless of what we found, FreshMinistries would abandon the neighborhood. It appears from our follow-up conversations with representatives of the agency, FreshMinistries has plans to serve the neighborhood for the foreseeable future.

Note

1 A *census tract* is a geographic region defined (in this case by the government) for the purpose of taking a *census*. Tract 4 and 5 cover the majority of the East Jacksonville Core neighborhood—with the outside boundaries falling on mainly industrial or city use. Tract 10 also covers the jail and part of the “revitalized” downtown core. The additional land covered by Tracts 11 and 12 is similar to the core neighborhood.