

Southwest Rockford Neighborhood Brownfields Revitalization Framework

Rockford, Illinois

October 2020

*Technical assistance provided by U.S. EPA Office of Brownfields and Land Revitalization
contractors GDIT and Vita Nuova*

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Land Revitalization technical assistance supported the development of a Brownfields Revitalization Framework in Rockford, Illinois. Technical assistance was provided from May – October 2020. *EPA's Land Revitalization technical assistance to Rockford, IL was completed in October 2020. Due to COVID-19 travel restrictions that began in March 2020, EPA did not allow contractors and EPA staff to visit the site in-person, as was originally planned.*

The Southwest Rockford Neighborhood contains multiple brownfields and abandoned properties as a result of historic redlining, an increase dilapidated housing, and lack of economic opportunities in the area. The technical assistance was provided to the City of Rockford to identify community-driven needs and goals, combining brownfields redevelopment and community revitalization tools into a single approach to benefit community residents. Redevelopment is being aimed at serving the current residents' needs, which is why an extensive interview process was conducted as a large part of this technical assistance project. This report outlines the technical assistance completed:

- Identifies physical interventions to attract investment to the brownfield sites located in the northwest corner of the southwest Rockford neighborhood.
- Identifies programs and initiatives to address the disparities, blight and economic and environmental impacts in the entire neighborhood.
- Identifies a direction for a funding charrette and partners.

The report findings can be used to help the City of Rockford move forward with additional brownfields revitalization activities.

The three attachments provided with this report include summary slides and information to accompany each of the sections attached. The information is delivered in PowerPoint so it can be easily presented or otherwise shared by the community.

Attachments to this report include:

- 2.Rockford Presentations and Analysis 10 01 2020.ppt
- 3.Rockford Economic Development 10 01 2020.ppt
- 4.Rockford Virtual Workshop 10 01 2020.ppt **Please note that this is shared as presented on October 1, 2020, but participant feedback indicated that additional analysis needs to be done for the physical planning component.*

Southwest Rockford Neighborhood Revitalization Framework

The Southwest Rockford neighborhoods are negatively impacted by high rates of abandonment and low home ownership rates, substandard housing conditions, and a lack of economic opportunity. The EPA technical assistance focused on identifying opportunities for economic development around historic brownfields in the area shown in Figure 1. The project area narrowed away from a corridor approach because the data and the city indicated the strongest economic development options were in that area and near the Barber Colman site. The technical assistance helped identify programs and initiatives that would positively impact neighborhood health over time.

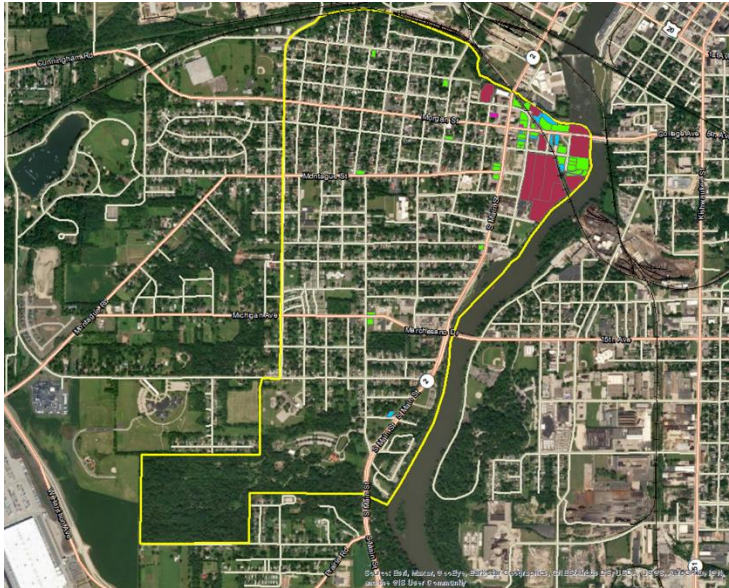


Figure 1. Rockford Study Area with Brownfields.

This technical assistance is designed to serve as the basis for a long-term public investment and intervention which needs to be led by a coalition of partners with the City to strengthen some of Rockford's most economically impacted historic neighborhoods. Neighborhood revitalization will require local, state and federal government intervention because the private development market is weak. Efforts are also needed to increase the capacity of local nonprofits and neighborhood organizations to participate in the community revitalization.

The technical assistance aims to identify activities that will require at least 3-5 years to implement and make positive changes in the neighborhood and surrounding community. The technical assistance included a strong community stakeholder engagement approach, which will be the first step to improving economic development for the neighborhood.

The primary outcome of this initial technical assistance is to secure public interest and investment in the Southwest Rockford neighborhood through enhanced partnerships, communication, and funding options. Additionally, the technical assistance identified the need to identify programs and initiatives for the neighborhood (as outlined in Attachment – 4. Rockford Virtual Workshop 10 01 2020.ppt). Also, the Barber Colman site and areas to the west were identified as the key catalytic area for the community to focus and create a vision of reuse around.

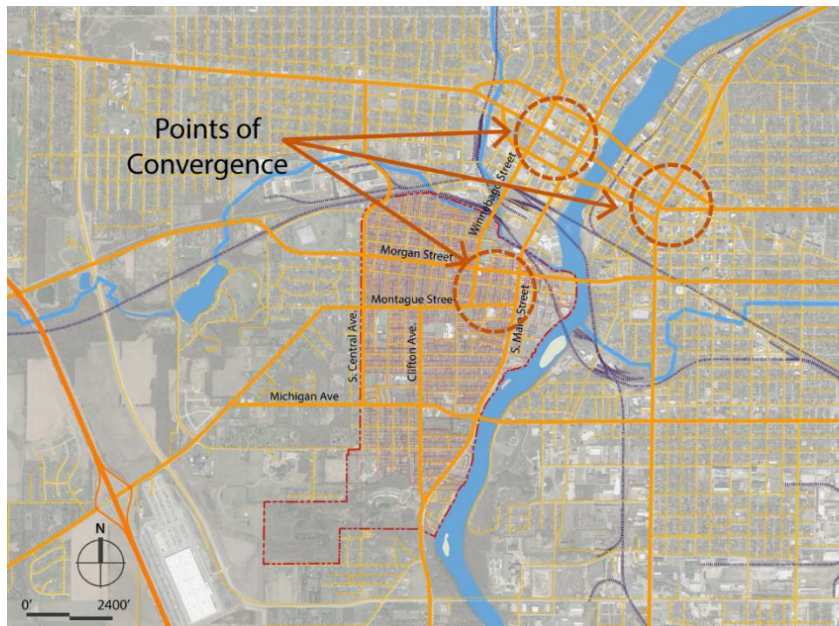


Figure 2. Principal Roads and Points of Convergence in Study Area.

The technical assistance provided by EPA is a baseline analysis. The information provided here serves as a platform for future planning. The City and USEPA anticipate hosting a funding charrette for the neighborhood and setting up additional next steps. The funding charrette will provide an opportunity for the City of Rockford to enhance partnerships and identify potential funding sources in support of the community vision for the neighborhood.

Current Rockford Planning and Neighborhood Analysis

The EPA technical assistance reviewed existing city-wide and corridor plans provided by the City of Rockford. These documents provided useful historic context for neighborhood connections and programs of interest for the study area. The analysis of the past planning reports helped the technical assistance team understand where the city has previously focused efforts and provided good background information given that a site visit was unable to occur for the project.

The following planning reports were provided as part of this project research and summarized here to keep consistent reporting for the City of Rockford:

- South Main Planning Meetings
- 2004 Revitalization of Barber-Colman Complex (Hendricks Group)
- 2004 Immigrant Landing Plan (SWIFTT)
- 2004 South Rockford Target Plan (SWIFTT)
- April 2008 Southwest Rockford Charrette Report (AIA North Illinois & Pilgrim's Promise CDC)
- South Main Revitalization Strategy (The Lakota Group (planning and design), TY Lin International (transportation & planning), CLUE Group (market & economic analysis), & the Arc Design Resources Inc. (civil & infrastructure engineers))
- 2015 River Edge Development Zone Plan (Landmarks Illinois)
- 2015 CEDS: 2015-2020
- December 2017- 2016 TIF Funds Plan
- 2020 Comprehensive Plan

In addition to the review of existing plans, the technical assistance team completed a neighborhood analysis (See Attachment – 2.Rockford Presentations and Analysis 10 01 2020.ppt). The GIS analysis, coupled with the stakeholder interviews, served as the foundation for:

- Development of programs and initiatives for the neighborhood; and
- Targeting physical planning around brownfields and the Barber Colman site.

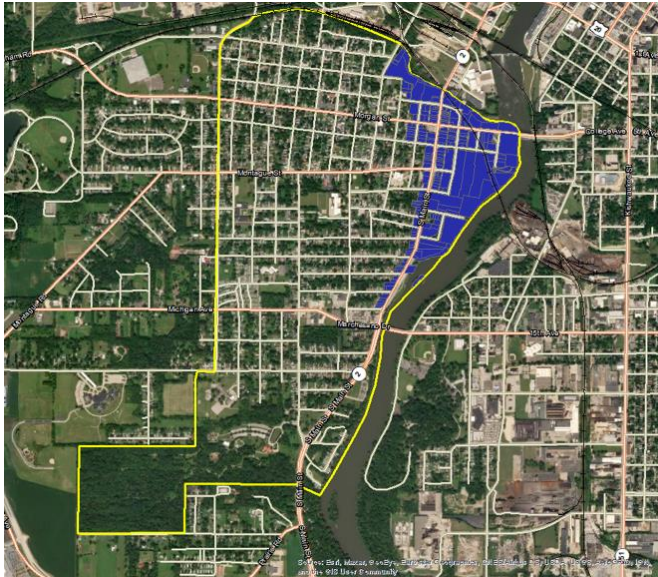


Figure 3. Redevelopment Area - River Edge.

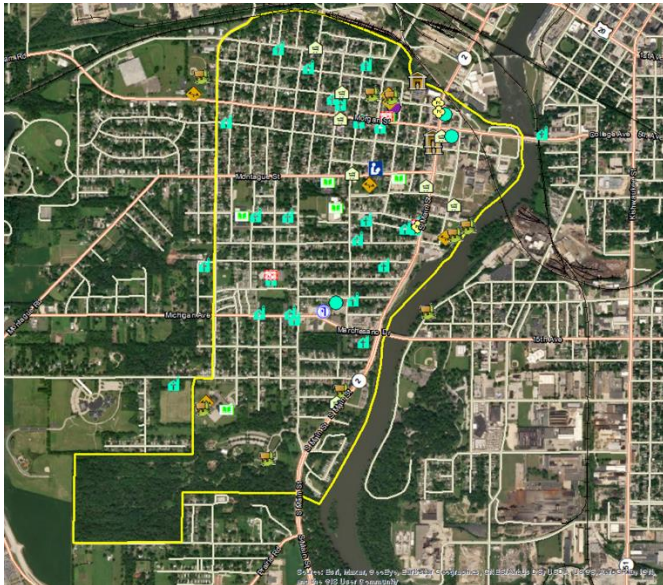


Figure 4. Neighborhood Assets marked within Study Area.

Southwest Rockford Neighborhood – Stakeholder Involvement

A significant portion of this technical assistance was to engage stakeholders from all sectors to represent the community. This included city and state agency staff, non-profits, churches, community development corporations (CDCs), community groups, and neighborhood residents.

Stakeholders were invited to share their input about their community in order to understand impacts to the health and well-being of the neighborhood. The stakeholders shared their thoughts on both physical aspects of the neighborhood as well as social factors. The input provided by the stakeholders demonstrated the need to improve community relationships and ensure that representatives from residents of all backgrounds and ethnicities are included in the planning. For instance, the process was unable to identify an organization that could provide input and perspective from a range of local Latino community members. Additional work to understand and engage the Latino community will need to be a future aspect of continued work in the neighborhood.

Stakeholders were invited to share thoughts on the following:

1. Community change experienced in the last three years
2. Biggest challenge facing the neighborhood
3. Reasons for recommending the neighborhood to others
4. Location of community's center
5. Safety during day and night
6. Projects and funding
7. Attributes of a healthy neighborhood
8. Other stakeholders to include

How has the community changed in the last three years? Better or worse? Why? What makes you say that?
• Mixed Response – Improved in last few years; stayed the same or gotten worse; gotten worse • Positive Change: Embassy Suites Hotel • Barber Colman site languishes • Route 2 improvements mixed response – some see as improvement; some as unintentionally speeding up traffic
What is the biggest challenge this neighborhood faces?
• Community Engagement • Our process has not engaged the Latino residents • High poverty and youth issues • Investments • Poor housing stock and divestment • Funding cuts • Abandoned structures • Vacant storefronts • Property maintenance • Perception and negative stereotypes – need more positive attributes
Would you recommend this community for anyone else to live in and why?
• Affordability • Potential for affordable homes • First time home buyers (Want to see more homeownership)

- Community - Near Latino populations - Lifestyle - Good for young professionals who want to live in a walkable, bikeable area to downtown and arboretum
Where is the center of the community? Is there a building / landmark that people go to?
- No consistency in the response - Institutional: - Montague Library - Arboretum - Booker Washington Center - Neighborhood Centers: - South Main and Montague - Morgan Street up to Court 1000 block to Cedar - Food Market La Chiquita
How safe do you feel walking in the neighborhood during the day? At night? Why?
- During the day – Some feel safe during day and some do not feel safe during day - At night – Some not sure about the night and some feel safe in home at night - Safety Issues mentioned: - Streets not cared for - Sidewalks blocked by cars - Domestic issues - Vacant buildings - Drug and gang activity - Large dogs - Rental population with high turn-over
What redevelopment/revitalization activity/project would you like to see done in this neighborhood?
- Some activity/project ideas: - Grant programs to fix up homes in the area - Retail development in the South Main Corner - Build off the Embassy Suites (area between Embassy Suites and Barber Colman) 3 Block area west of Barber Colman - Fitness center - More restaurants
What funding sources are you aware of that exist to support the activity/projects mentioned?
- Private Foundations - Keep Northern IL Beautiful - Kjellstrom Family Foundations - Community Foundation of Northern IL - Charities - Government - New Market tax credits - Federal and state historic preservation - City redevelopment fund- 1% tax

- DECO (Department of Commerce and Opportunity)
- CDBG funds
- Transportation funds
- HOME dollars from the city
- Want to create a CDFI for the area
- Private Equity
 - Have to work with banking industry for CRA products
- Grants
 - Choice neighborhood grants
 - JP Morgan advanced cities grant (applied for this neighborhood)
 - Local Entities Foundations
 - Arboretum
 - Local Foundations
 - Land banks

What does a healthy neighborhood look like and what steps would you want to move in that direction?

- Building Community
 - People know their neighbors and take care of each other
 - Parks are for the community to gather
 - African American males are involved and strong role models
 - Needs to be a sense of pride
 - Employers care and give back to the city
 - Citizen participation
- Safety
 - Drug addiction must be addressed
 - People need to feel safe walking in the area
 - Low to moderate crime
 - Safe recreational areas close by and kids can walk to the park or down the block safely
 - Clean streets including no broken sidewalks
- Education
 - Public education must improve
 - Schools as part of the community
- Land Use
 - Balance between owner occupied and rentals
 - Mixed income
 - Healthy housing
 - Access to fresh foods
 - Should not be able to tell the difference between home ownership and rental properties
 - Proud of their home and yard
 - Access to key needs in the neighborhood
 - Diverse in land use: parks, schools and shops
 - Diverse activities
 - Walkability (desire to walk downtown or to a commerce area on South Main)

Stakeholder Organization	Contact Name
5th Ward Alderman 5th Ward Neighborhood Group	Venita Hervey
Great Neighborhoods	Cira Richardson, Gary Anderson, Zack Miller (Transform Rockford), Derricka Davis, Denny Rich, Patrick O'Keefe, Keri Asevedo
Booker Washington Center	Joyce Higgins (Executive Director)
Great Neighborhoods	Sarah Brinkmann
Rockford Park District	Tim Bragg (Park Planner) Dan Jacobson (Superintendent of Operations)
City of Rockford	Brandon Kruse (Rehab Construction Specialist)
Rockford Metropolitan Agency for Planning	Jason Holcomb
Zammuto Restaurant	Zina Horton (Owner)
Tinker Swiss	Samantha Hochmann
Neighborhood Residents	Bliss Sterling and Freddy Sterling
SWIFTT and Ethnic Village Neighborhood	Valeria DeCastris
Supermercado Guanajuato	Daisey Marvillo
Rockford, IL Resident	Unnamed resident with Daisy
SWIFTT, Former Alderman	Victory Bell
SWIFTT, Former Executive Director of Tinker Cottage	Beverly Broyles
Ethnic Heritage Museum	Six Board members provided feedback anonymously

Southwest Rockford Neighborhood – Virtual Reuse Workshop

On October 1, 2020, the technical assistance team hosted a virtual workshop to review the findings with the City, as well as propose several programs and initiatives that could help move the reuse vision ahead in the neighborhood. A key outcome of this workshop was the determination that the northwest corner of the study area, near to the Barber Colman site is likely to benefit from development occurring in southern downtown around the convention center and Embassy Suites. This is the area most likely to positively impact the neighborhood and some programs and initiatives were shared with the workshop participants.

Catalytic Project Ideas – Programs and Initiatives
Historic South Rockford Neighborhood Identity
• Neighborhood branding and place-making • Infrastructure Improvements: • Improve walkability • More crosswalks • Sidewalk repairs • Streetscaping • Creating a “Center” • Social gatherings • Programs and recreation opportunities • Free Wi-Fi hot spots
Development
• New Development Along River • Public access to river • Recreation opportunities • Main Street and Barber Colman • Mixed-Use development • Reconsider zoning • Morgan Street Area • Morgan Street Bridge (more connection) • Booker-Tinker Connection • South Main • Neighborhood Centric Commercial District Improvement
Housing Improvements
• Incentive for participation in existing programs • Non-punitive • Bi-lingual resources • Guiding project to completion • Additional Housing Rehabilitation Programs: • Façade Improvements • Landscaping • Energy and Lighting Efficiency Improvement • Security Lighting • Homeowner Maintenance Education and Guidelines (Positive not Punitive) • Messaging and signage campaign • Flyers and notification

Catalytic Project Ideas – Programs and Initiatives	
Vacant Parcel Programs	
• Clean and Green • Pocket Parks • Side lot transfers programs	
Neighbors Teaming Up	
• Neighborhood Groups and City-led Coalitions • Team Up Clean Up • Volunteer groups • Public/Private Partnerships to create positive change • Corporations to engage in community • Existing Institutions to partner with Community	
Safety	
• A well-lit neighborhood (crucial component to safety) • Technology Programs • Lights out program (city and utility) • Porch Lights On Campaign • Police Night Out / Take Back the Night • Rental properties and landlord responsibility and accountability	

The virtual workshop participants determined that continued work needs to focus on the physical interventions around brownfields prior to a City-hosted funding charrette. This will include looking more closely at the catalytic brownfields, then at the parcels associated with these areas, as well as infrastructure features such as roads and sidewalks to improve neighborhood connectivity. The findings and ideas produced from this EPA Land Revitalization technical assistance can be used for the next step in the Rockford Reuse Vision and be summarized and built upon during a future funding charrette.