



The **Community Builders**, Inc.

West Philadelphia, PA



“a multi-faceted development plan that has reduced crime, increased job opportunities, improved the quality of life for the neighborhood’s residents, and enhanced the university’s ability to attract the top students, faculty, staff and research opportunities.”

*Jury comment from the
Urban Land Institute (ULI)
2003 Award for Excellence*

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WEST PHILADELPHIA

During the years prior to 1994, community residents, local civic associations, elected leaders, Penn faculty, and members of the University administration had all engaged in extensive planning to consider ways of addressing such issues as education, homeownership, and retail development in West Philadelphia. A variety of proposed initiatives had been explored at the community level, and some revitalization planning had been completed and shared with University administrators. Many of the essential components of what became the West Philadelphia Initiatives were outlined initially in these community plans and some related programs had been introduced. What changed the nature of Penn’s planning for neighborhood revitalization after 1994 – and particularly after 1996 – was the University’s commitment to full institutional engagement and a comprehensive program that would draw on the University’s leadership, administrative capabilities, and resources.

Initially, Penn’s advisor in the development of the West Philadelphia Initiatives was The Community Builders, Inc., an urban housing developer with a special focus on comprehensive neighborhood revitalization. After a period of development and collaboration with TCB, Penn institutionalized the process and the University’s administrative staff took charge of all planning and implementation responsibilities.

One approach to planning for neighborhood revitalization adopted by many municipal governments is to make a public commitment to an overall development concept, then to pursue substantive planning in order to design and execute associated implementation strategies. An alternative approach is to engage in a public “visioning” process, through which community constituencies are invited to participate in establishing goals and priorities and organizing a framework for revitalization activities. In planning for the west Philadelphia Initiatives, the University chose to pursue neither of these approaches. An initial announcement of a “master plan” would have aroused suspicion about the University’s motives (particularly in light of the negative experiences associated with Penn’s expansion during the 1960s). The launching of a “visioning” process would have created unrealistic expectations and delayed or prevented implementation.

Instead, the University consulted broadly with community groups to develop a comprehensive revitalization strategy, initially building from community plans as the basis for Penn’s own agenda. Then, rather than publicly announcing the adoption of this agenda or entering into a full community review of this agenda as a whole, the University made a conscious decision to “roll out” the West Philadelphia Initiatives individually: each activity was a proposed collaboration among Penn, community members and other supporters. For example, UC Brite, an early activity through which the University offered a financial incentive to encourage the installation of sidewalk and porch lighting, was proposed – and subsequently implemented – as a collaboration among the University and organized block groups, major landlords, the Philadelphia Electric Company and the local electricians’ union.

Penn’s approach to planning for neighborhood revitalization made it possible to engage in dialogue with community members and work out problems by discussing specific members and work out problems by discussing specific individual program activities, rather than attempting to secure buy-in for a broad development concept of implement an approach without community involvement.