

Case Study

## Cross-Sector Community Revitalization

*An Experiential Case Study*

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### Abstract

This case study highlights the process of community organizing for the revitalization of an economically depressed urban neighborhood. Faculty and students of a graduate public affairs program collaborated with community organizers, real-estate developers, nonprofit organizations, and local government personnel to create a community revitalization plan based on inputs and feedback from the residents and other stakeholders of the neighborhood. This teaching case outlines the key issues presented by the community members during visioning exercises, the design of the plan, and the community's response to the conceived plan.

**Keywords:** *community organizing; experiential learning; community revitalization*

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As cities have developed throughout the history of the United States, a common factor that has become apparent in all major urban agglomerations is the dilapidation of urban cores. In the neighborhood of Willow Creek located in northeast Texas, urban decay has become the prevalent norm with ramshackle homes, neglected streets, unemployment, drug addiction, and gang violence. Community members, led by Joe Holt and Jane Dresden, grew frustrated and began the process of urban revitalization. The community leaders collaborated with local university faculty, taking initiative to foster a strategic community development plan. Through the process of community engagement and strategic preparation, a community development plan was created. To preserve anonymity, the names of the participants in the study have been changed. The name of the neighborhood has also been changed, as has the major metropolitan area in which the neighborhood is located.

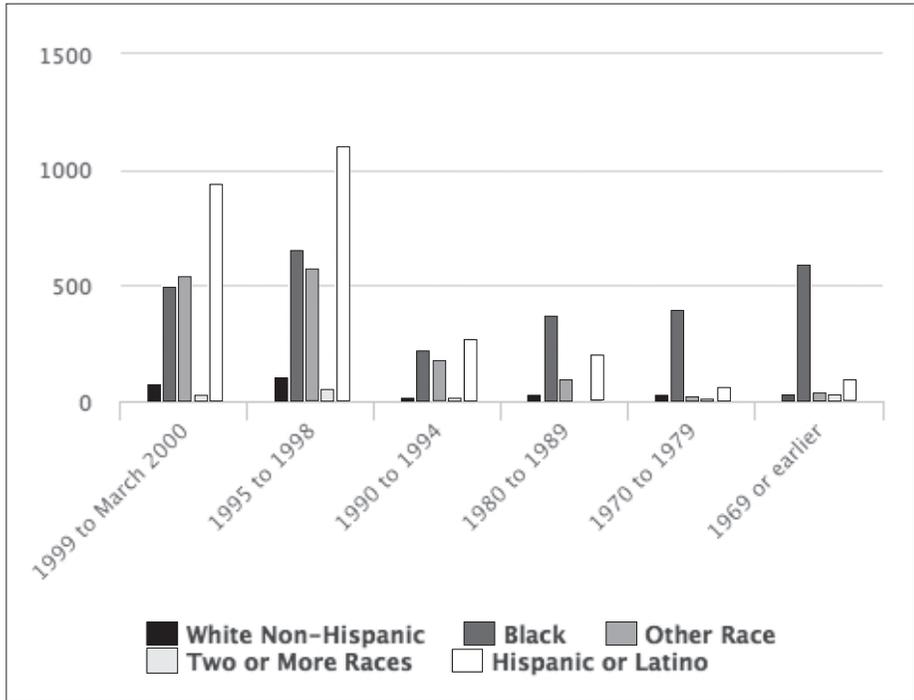
## Case Study

### The Neighborhood

The neighborhood of Willow Creek is located in northeast Texas. In 2010, Willow Creek was made up of approximately 200 houses built in the 1940s (Polk, 2010). U.S. Census Bureau data from 2010 indicate a high population of Hispanic or Latinos at 55% and African Americans at 38% in this neighborhood. The website city-data.com (based on 2015 American Community Survey data) indicates that the specific zip code has two convenience stores, seven fast-food restaurants, and one drugstore. There are also high numbers of renters, at 69% of total occupied households. The median income, home value, and educational levels are all lower than the surrounding Anytown average, as noted on the city-data.com website. There are six acute care hospitals in the vicinity, but no health care facilities in the immediate neighborhood (Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services, 2014). Further, 38% of the residents have no health insurance, about 33% depend on Medicare or Medicaid, and the rest have insurance through employers or direct purchase (Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services, 2014). This neighborhood also has low educational achievement with 33% of the population not completing high school, 29% graduating high school, 22% with some college or an associate's degree, and 12% with a bachelor's degree or higher (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Resident Ryan Pool notes, "We have the highest crime rate, more drugs, more teenage pregnancy, more dropouts, more lack of education, we don't even own our businesses in the community," signifying the perception of significant social and economic issues. This statement is consistent with findings in Berg and Murdoch's (2010) study on grocery stores in the low income neighborhoods of Anytown; educational data on primary, middle, and high school from the Texas Education Agency and Anytown Independent School District; and health statistics from the Texas Department of State Health Services.

Willow Creek has also been experiencing environmental issues. The neighborhood is located in a flat plain next to the Trinity River and has been subject to frequent flooding (Schutze, 2010). The Anytown Floodway Extension Project map shows a new levee to be built to protect the neighborhood as part of a multimillion-dollar project by the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers and the City of Anytown, but city leaders indicate that this project may be delayed because of funding uncertainties. Another area of concern

for the neighborhood is the pollution by industries located just off of the river, which has resulted in critical water and soil contamination of at least a third of the residences (Polk, 2010). As a result, the more affluent residents are leaving the neighborhood to live in nearby cities. Figure 1 shows the demographics changes for the community, with statistics from city-data.com.



**Figure 1.** Willow Creek demographic changes by year householders moved into unit (<http://www.city-data.com>).

### Process of Community Engagement

Community organizing is “a planned process to activate a community to use its own social structures and any available resources to accomplish community goals that are decided on primarily by community representatives and generally consistent with local values” (Bracht, 1999, p. 86). Joe Holt is a Willow Creek resident, business owner, and community organizer. Jane Dresden is a real-estate developer, community activist, and founder of a community development nonprofit organization in Willow Creek. They collaborated with local university faculty with the goal of developing the neighborhood and attracting people back to their community. The faculty designed this activity as a service-learning project in a nonprofit management course. This project also received approval from the university’s institutional review board. Students in the course were tasked with engaging the community and utilizing community feedback in creating the plan. The faculty and student researchers prepared semistructured questions, researched best practices, and gathered applicable examples for a visioning

session with the community. Joe invited community residents and business owners to attend the session. Approximately 30 individuals attended the session in September 2015. Three attendees were area residents, with the remainder being local nonprofit leaders, area business owners, and leaders of surrounding neighborhoods.

The faculty initiated the session by providing an overview of the expectations from the session and the community members' roles in providing input into the process of revitalization. Then community members were asked a series of open-ended questions to solicit input into the process of development. Questions included the following: What is great about the neighborhood? What are the strengths and challenges of the community? What is the cultural history of the area? What are the needs of the community members? Resident Vanessa Clara began by stating,

If we start working together and stop working individually, say let's take one project, then get it off the ground, then the next project and the next. But everybody [is] working on their own thing and don't have enough money, enough time to get it off the ground. But if we take one thing, right there and build it. That will be the center that it all springs out from.

Other residents, explaining that "community follows culture," wanted to focus on the localized culture and begin festivals honoring the community. "We need to have festivals to get people over here to see what we've got and then we can start building," stated Slaton Ross. The discussion shifted to the issues of crime, drugs, and poverty that residents see daily. Tom Rice stated, "Sometimes when I turn into the street, I want to lock my door because of what we see." Victoria Willis continued by noting, "Trouble brought the drugs in, commerce brought the drugs in." Weston Olmos reflected on poverty and concluded, "Senior residents are dying every day because they don't have food, they don't have utilities, because they are on a fixed income." Discussion around these problems quickly became heated and revealed a concern over external intervention, with residents questioning the nonresident attendees. One resident asked,

How can you revitalize the community when you aren't part of the community? How can we sit here and listen to other people talk about what they mean to the community? I don't know you. I haven't seen you anywhere.

Tom added, "You need to bring in people from the community, not bring in people just because they say they have knowledge." At this point, the faculty and community organizers reiterated the salience of the visioning exercise, which was to generate residents' input into the planning of the revitalization. It was apparent that community residents were wary of external intervention after years of indifferent attitude from the council and worried by the presence of a significant number of nonresidents. By the end of the visioning exercise, however, residents were excited about the revitalization and participated actively in sharing their concerns and needs.

Community members were concerned about gentrification and the fear of being forced out of the community, the lack of employment avenues in the area, a deficit in community civic engagement, and poor involvement by local government. Ryan Poole stated,

When I go [to City Hall], it is so disheartening to look around the chambers and see more people behind the horseshoe than there are in the audience. Where are the people from Willow Creek? They aren't there because they don't understand where their power is. Empowerment is taking the simple thing you have, which is participation. Get in front of people that can hear you talk about your concerns. So when people say "you didn't tell us that," we can say "yes we did."

The community members who participated in the visioning session were African American and spoke about the need to preserve the African American culture, expressing significant concerns regarding race. Slaton Ross explained,

[Anytown] is a cotton town. [Anytown] is built on slavery that picked the cotton around here. And so that is what is going on—a relationship between owners and pickers. Unless you understand the history of the city and how it operates, men will come in and take back the ownership of the city.

One observation is that although Latinos or Hispanics make up over 50% of the community's population, none attended the visioning session.

### **Community Needs Identification**

Following the visioning session discussion, the researchers listed the primary issues, needs, and requirements that the participants suggested. The overall issues were opportunities for employment, access to health care, access to educational facilities, and the establishment of a cultural center promoting the residents' African American cultural heritage. Participants described the following detailed requirements:

- establishing new community-owned businesses including grocery stores, retail stores, entertainment venues, and restaurants, particularly those serving cultural food;
- building hospitals or health care centers, and trade schools for health care apprenticeship opportunities;
- revitalizing local schools;
- hosting community festivals to generate external visitors;
- creating neighborhood parks;
- ensuring neighborhood safety;
- establishing a historic district; and
- improving housing including single-family homes and apartments.

Participants then voted on their priority items and suggested further items that were not included in the first round of the visioning exercise. New suggestions included cleaning up and landscaping the neighborhood and establishing colleges or universities and a recreation center. Community members ranked the need for grocery stores, community cultural festivals, neighborhood safety measures, new single-family housing, and job opportunities as their priority items.

### **Strategic Issues**

The researchers took the community inputs from the visioning exercise and drafted a strategic plan for community development. They researched Willow Creek by conducting a strengths-weaknesses-opportunity-threats (SWOT) analysis of the neighborhood. Figure 2 shows the SWOT analysis.

<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Weaknesses</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong, united community support</li> <li>• Close proximity to Downtown Anytown and the Trinity river.</li> <li>• City support, although not immediately expressed.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bad roads and few walkable sidewalks.</li> <li>• Lack of protection from Trinity river flooding.</li> <li>• Lack of employment prospects.</li> <li>• Lack of public transportation.</li> </ul>
<b>Opportunities</b>	<b>Threats</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Economic development possibilities.</li> <li>• Cultural development possibilities.</li> <li>• Nonprofit involvement and support in revitalization planning.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Plans for demolishing Willow Creek as of 2010 by the City.</li> <li>• Community branded as unsavory part of town.</li> <li>• Neighborhood safety issues.</li> </ul>

**Figure 2.** SWOT analysis.

The researchers used the SWOT analysis to examine the four areas of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats based on an assessment of the Willow Creek neighborhood. The sections listing strengths and weaknesses present the internal present capacity of the community, and the sections with opportunities and challenges present the external future potential. The analysis considers the social, political, cultural, and economic forces that affect this community.

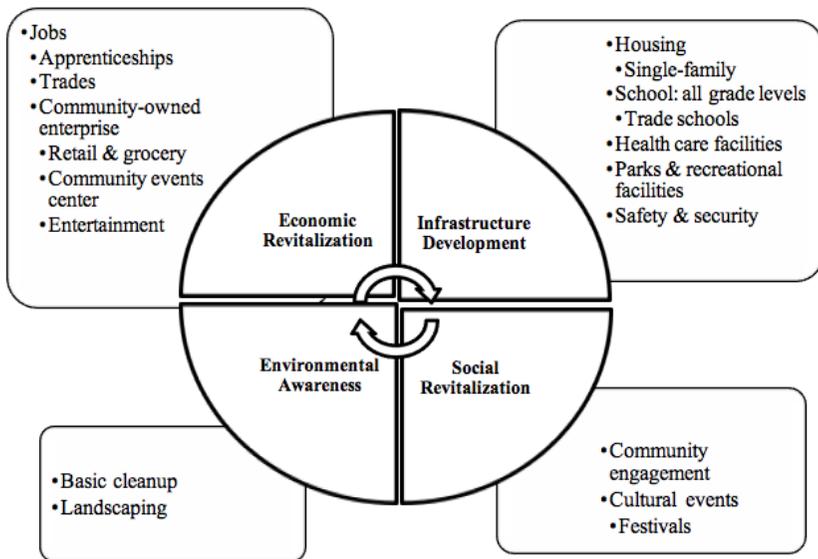
Based on community feedback and SWOT analysis, the researchers identified four strategic issues for the community. Targeting these immediate needs may lead to the economic and social revitalization of Willow Creek. From these issues, researchers created strategic goals and objectives. The targeted issue of economic revitalization included the goals to create and increase opportunities for employment and to increase opportunities for community members to start their own businesses. The targeted issue of infrastructure development included goals to improve housing, increase access to training, create food and entertainment venues, increase health care access, and enhance the safety of the neighborhood. The targeted issue of social revitalization included goals of enhancing community engagement by holding social and diverse events. The final targeted issue of environmental awareness included goals for improving the aesthetics of the neighborhood, landscaping a major road, and creating new public spaces. Table 1 shows the four strategic issues that were identified during the visioning exercise with Willow Creek residents, business owners, and other stakeholders.

**Table 1**

*Community-Identified Strategic Issues*

<b>Issue</b>	<b>Description</b>
1 Economic Revitalization	Jobs, retail businesses
2 Infrastructure Development	Streets, housing, public transportation
3 Social Revitalization	Community interaction/engagement
4 Environmental Awareness	Neighborhood cleanup

The strategic plan was presented to the community in late 2015; many community representatives, including some who were not present at the initial planning sessions, attended this meeting. Approximately 60 community stakeholders attended the event. Nonprofit executives, industry representatives, and community leaders showed keen interest in the goals and objectives of the revitalization plan. There was positive feedback for the plan including the use of community input, which many feared would carry little weight. However, some members who were not present for the initial session raised concerns regarding the ongoing flooding in the neighborhood and pollution of the area. A local government representative in attendance stated no remediation plans were currently in place and suggested that an active and engaged neighborhood would generate more attention from city officials and policy makers to effect change. Figure 3 presents a more detailed description of the strategic issues and their corresponding needs.



*Figure 3.* Strategic issues and goals.

### Implications for Policy

Community organizing is rooted in the concept of leveraging the strength of networks within a community. The networks of people comprise the shared power of a community to effect change and development (Wood, 2007). The community organizing process can be top-down, involving decisions made by an authoritative body; bottom-up, when decisions are made at the grassroots levels; or a mix of both, involving the participation of all interested stakeholders, and the success of any of the methods depends largely on the context of application (Bezboruah, 2013). As evident from this case study, a process champion is key to rallying the critical mass for the support of such initiatives. This includes not only the residents and business owners of Willow Creek and residents of neighboring communities, but also people who are interested in

the development of the neighborhood such as the community activist and her network. Also important is the role of the university faculty and students who acted as facilitators of the process and brought about expertise and an objective perspective to the community issues through external research and data collection.

Community organizing in Willow Creek was a mixed effort with passive participation from statutory bodies and governmental agencies in the process. The local government, including the council representative and city employee, were well aware of the developments in Willow Creek, but observed the activities from a distance, offering factual advice only when it was requested. This could be due to the political nature of the issue. There is support for the eviction of the residents from Willow Creek so that this area could be repurposed for commercial activities. Also, historic race relations in the Anytown area could have been a political factor in a diverse larger community. One resident stated that because of the redlining or segregation of Anytown, the section of the city north of the line receives favorable treatment from the government, whereas the southern section, which comprises primarily African Americans, does not receive any governmental support. It would be improbable for any section of a major metropolitan area to receive no governmental support at all, but this was the perception of at least one citizen. Others nodded in agreement, suggesting this might be a common view. Regardless of the accuracy of the perception, schools are performing poorly, property values are diminishing, and some areas have high crime rates. Of the southern portion of the city, areas that have experienced revitalization have also seen gentrification of the residents. As such, revitalization efforts need to be collaborative and include not only the community members but also other stakeholders (government, elected officials, voluntary organizations, and corporations, among others) so that the effect of any proposed gentrification can be better understood. In the absence of such measures, communities will not have any incentive to redevelop, property values will continue to decline, and crime rates will continue to rise. If development efforts are not genuine collaboration, then poverty awareness will be pushed to the periphery and real community development will not happen.

### **Case Description for Instructors and Consultants**

As part of a service-learning project, faculty and students created a community development plan in collaboration with community organizers, activists, and residents of a north Texas neighborhood. Willow Creek is located in Anytown and is plagued with poverty and environmental issues. The ultimate goal of the strategic plan is to revitalize the neighborhood and create economic growth opportunities for the community members. This teaching case provides information on steps to effective strategic planning that includes visioning exercises, researching best practices, developing a mission statement, and using the input from the community to assist in forming a comprehensive community development plan.

#### **Facilitator Summary**

Willow Creek is a community located in the southern sector of Anytown, Texas. Poverty and crime rates are high. There are environmental concerns given the area is located next to the Trinity River and has been subject to frequent flooding and pollution from local industry along the river (Polk, 2010; Schutze, 2010).

An area resident and community organizer, Joe, from the Willow Creek neighborhood met with a university faculty to redevelop the community of Willow Creek, which is located a few miles from downtown Anytown. Jane, a community activist and nonprofit organization founder, was also present. The ultimate goal of the strategic plan is to revitalize the neighborhood and create economic opportunity in the area without displacing the current residents. The faculty designed this as a service-learning project and worked with students in a nonprofit management course to create a strategic community development plan. The faculty and student researchers engaged the community in a focus group and utilized community feedback in creating the strategic plan. They prepared visioning questions, researched best practices, and gathered applicable examples for the visioning session with the community.

Following the visioning session, the researchers utilized ideas, issues, and requests of the community members in drafting a strategic plan for community development. They researched the area by conducting a SWOT analysis, identified strategic targets from the issues, and developed goals and objectives based on community inputs from the visioning exercise.

The final strategic plan was presented to the community in a formal session in late 2015. Community members, including residents and business owners who did not attend the initial planning session, attended the presentation of the strategic plan. In addition, area industry representatives, local nonprofit executives, and community leaders, all having a stake in the development of Willow Creek, attended this session.

### **Suggestions for Classroom Instruction**

This case makes use of portions of the Willow Creek Community Development Strategic Plan (see Appendix), which students can use to process and work through the relevant issues. To prepare for case discussion, students should address the following questions when reading the case. Group students in small teams and ask them to prepare answers for the following questions and then discuss them with the other groups:

1. Discuss the case, especially the challenges of the community, without reading the strategies provided by the authors (see Appendix), and outline a plan to address these challenges. Then compare your plan outline to the strategies adopted by the authors of the case (see Appendix) to assess the following:
  - a. How would you address the challenges of the community?
  - b. Why did you proceed in this manner?
  - c. What are the major differences between how you and how the authors addressed the case?
  - d. After comparing strategies, what lessons did you learn?
  - e. How does your process of community engagement compare with the process of community engagement and community needs identification outlined in the main section of the manuscript?
2. Based on the information presented within the case study, what are some of the main issues that you would use to formulate a comprehensive strategic plan? How would you frame the issues and the goals?
3. What additional information should the authors have sought to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the needs and goals of Willow Creek residents and stakeholders? How would you access or elicit this information?
4. What potential biases from the community members, other stakeholders, or members of the class could jeopardize the formation of a strategic plan?

5. What should community leaders do to attract more citizens to the meetings discussed in this case study? What does the study of citizen engagement recommend for identifying and then engaging appropriate stakeholders?
6. Were the actions taken to formulate the strategic development plan for the Willow Creek Community in line with existing practices, policies, and/or theories?
7. Revitalization can take time, and the residents of Willow Creek wanted immediate action. What are short-term strategies for community revitalization that might generate results within a year? What are longer term strategies for multiple years?
8. What is “real community development”? How can the session leaders work with the community to achieve real community development?
9. How can the lessons learned from the case study be used in other community development and/or strategic planning cases? What are the most salient points that can be generalized, and what do you see as unique to individual communities?

### **Suggestions for Practitioners**

This case makes use of portions of the Willow Creek Community Development Strategic Plan (see Appendix), which participants can use to work through the issues that the case raises. To prepare for case discussion, participants should address the following questions when reading the case and preparing for the session.

1. Examine this case, especially the challenges of the community, without reading the strategies provided by the authors (see Appendix), and outline a plan to address these challenges. Then compare your plan outline to the strategies adopted by the authors of the case (see Appendix) to assess the following:
  - a. How would you address the challenges of the community?
  - b. Why did you proceed in this manner?
  - c. What are the major differences between how you and how the authors addressed the case?
  - d. After comparing strategies, what lessons did you learn?
  - e. How does your process of community engagement compare with the process of community engagement and community needs identification outlined in the main section of the manuscript?
2. Community input was sought through an open house discussion format with open-ended questions. What other options might have been utilized for community engagement and input, and what would you expect to be the pros and cons of those alternatives?
3. Despite the known demographics of the community, only one ethnicity was present during the open house. What could have been done to encourage a more representative sample to attend and participate? What are the challenges for encouraging more open communication across segments of a diverse community?
4. The presentation session attracted community members who had not been present for the initial meeting, and these new participants raised additional questions and points of consideration. How could this have been avoided? If avoidance was not possible, how can this be turned into an advantage?

5. In the initial meeting, only three participants (10%) were residents of Willow Creek. What is the appropriate percentage of landowning and renting residents that should be included in a largely financially oriented redevelopment plan? What are the risks and benefits of a different ratio?
6. Residents were concerned about gentrification. Is gentrification necessarily a good or a bad thing? What are the costs and benefits of gentrification, not just economically but also socially and culturally? How much weight should social scientists give to this variable when crafting redevelopment plans?
7. What is “real community development”? How can the session leaders work with the community to achieve “real community development”?
8. When redevelopment hinges on financial investment and local residents are concerned with preservation of culture and heritage, how can a redevelopment plan accommodate diverging interests while maximizing economic impact?

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## Appendix

**Table 1A**

*Strategic Goals and Objectives*

Strategic issue	Goals	Objectives
Issue 1: Economic Revitalization	1. Create and increase economic opportunities	Reach out to staffing agencies in the immediate area Work with organizations to establish apprenticeship programs such as Community Colleges, Universities, Stone Masonry Program, TxDOT, etc.
	2. Increase opportunities for residents to start small businesses	Connect with potential funders and micro-lenders, such as Small Business Development Center, PeopleFund, and Small Business Administration, to help individuals in the community to start small local businesses Partner with other local businesses
Issue 2: Infrastructure Development	1. Address housing issues	Partner with Habitat for Humanity to rebuild homes Reach out to nonprofit organizations that could rally volunteers to help with home building
	2. Improve access to training	Establish local trade schools for vocational education Connect to the local Texas Workforce Commission Partner with area educational and trade schools
	3. Establish food and entertainment venues	Launch food truck program (with outside contracts that benefit the community or start the food truck themselves) – good transition phase before building of restaurants Build community center with kitchen (for the various diverse community events) Start restaurants with start-up business funds from nonprofits and micro-lenders Connect with Chamber of Commerce and other such bodies to initiate new businesses or franchises in food areas Establish local grocery store or open market (or flea market) for community residents
	4. Improve access to health care	Establish free community health clinic (inside existing structures – community center or church) Recruit qualified volunteers willing to donate time to community (with part-time doctor on staff) Host community health fairs Work with local public health department
	5. Enhance safety and security of neighborhood	Assemble neighborhood crime watch Partner with City's Crime Watch Program

**Table 1A (cont.)**

<b>Strategic issue</b>	<b>Goals</b>	<b>Objectives</b>
Issue 3: Social Revitalization	1. Enhance community engagement	Hold regular community meetings
		Engage additional citizens and residents in community building discussions
		Create committees or subgroups to focus on different aspects of the community plan
Issue 3: Social Revitalization	2. Hold cultural events	Utilize or repurpose Joe's business space for entertainment and recreation
		Establish community-centered events to build community identity
		Host food festival that incorporates the various food styles in the community
Issue 3: Social Revitalization	3. Hold diverse events	Host arts and entertainment festival presenting the various music, dance, and artistic styles of the community
		Increase the involvement of children in after-school games or recreational programs
		Host cultural night with different themes each quarter (food, art, music)
Issue 4: Environmental Awareness	1. Enhance neighborhood aesthetics	Promote events for seniors (BINGO night, potluck dinner, dancing, community fundraisers, i.e., chili cook-off)
		Initiate regular basic cleanup of neighborhood – monthly or quarterly cleanup
		Reach out to Keep Anytown Beautiful (KAB) and Public Works to pick up large items
Issue 4: Environmental Awareness	2. Initiate landscaping in general areas along the main thoroughfare	Establish no dumping areas by placing signs
		Encourage community members to clean up and maintain their properties
		Reach out to industry in the area and discuss possibilities for environmental cleanup
Issue 4: Environmental Awareness	3. Enact new developments	Consider becoming a pilot neighborhood for KAB Pride in Your Neighborhood
		Create food gardens and agricultural areas (with farmer's market space)
		Repurpose existing park to establish pavilion area with usable park and picnic space where people can congregate (City Park)