

# PUSH Buffalo's Green Development Zone: a Model for New Economy Community Development

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# Introduction

2008 marks the year that PUSH Buffalo founded the Green Development Zone in Buffalo's West Side. Encompassing 25 square blocks, the Green Development Zone (GDZ) is an area that PUSH is making more environmentally and economically sustainable.<sup>1</sup> PUSH stands for People United for Sustainable Housing, and it is a non-profit corporation that uses a unique combination of community organizing, policy advocacy, and neighborhood redevelopment.<sup>2</sup>

The West Side is a racially diverse neighborhood with a large immigrant and refugee population.<sup>3</sup> The median household income of those living within the bounds of the GDZ is roughly \$20,000<sup>4</sup> with 40% of residents and 60% of children living in poverty.<sup>5</sup> This is the type of community that city planning processes often do not serve successfully, which makes PUSH's presence in the neighborhood all the more important.

PUSH ultimately aims to create a "resilient and regenerative community" in the West Side. The goal is to make a "just transition" from the old, fossil-fuel driven economy, toward the "new economy," which values people and planet over profit.<sup>6</sup> By creating green, affordable housing, PUSH not only helps the current West Side community to stay in their homes but also creates new job opportunities in green construction.

PUSH started its work by addressing two concerns of neighborhood residents: vacant properties and high utility bills. To address these concerns, PUSH ran successful organizing campaigns to compel government action. But PUSH also took matters into its own hands as a community developer: it purchased vacant lots and buildings and redeveloped them into green spaces and green, energy efficient housing, while also working to weatherize existing homes.

PUSH concentrates its green development efforts within the GDZ. This 25-square-block area was chosen because of its high concentration of vacant properties,<sup>7</sup> the relatively low cost of these lots and homes, existing assets such as the Massachusetts Avenue Project and the Boys and Girls Club, and the proximity of gentrifying forces.<sup>8</sup> Through its work in the GDZ, PUSH demonstrates that environmentally sustainable development can benefit low-income residents. The savings on energy and utilities bills outweigh the upfront costs of green projects and make the housing economically, as well as environmentally, sustainable.<sup>9</sup> And the work of greening lots and buildings provides living wage jobs for neighborhood residents and other disadvantaged workers.

In 2011, PUSH's GDZ was one of three sustainable housing initiatives to win a \$10,000 award in an international competition funded by the Rockefeller Foundation and held by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the U.S. Department of State, and the American Planning Association, with support from the Brazilian Ministry of Cities.<sup>10</sup>

## COMPARING THE GDZ TO OTHER GREEN NEIGHBORHOODS

While other cities and neighborhoods have implemented aspects of the kind of green and affordable development that PUSH does, few have achieved the level of success that PUSH has in terms of sustainability, affordability, and aesthetics. In addition, sustainable development tends to be small-scale development by non-government groups or larger-scale projects implemented through a city's housing authority. Rarely has a community organization overhauled an entire neighborhood.

New Columbia in Portland, Oregon, is a comparable example of green development. This mixed-income neighborhood has both homes for sale and public housing. Its green elements include rain gardens, solar panels, and geothermal heating.<sup>11</sup> However, New Columbia differs from PUSH's GDZ in that New Columbia originated as public housing, and it was organized and funded by Portland's housing authority, not by a neighborhood-based non-profit.<sup>12</sup>

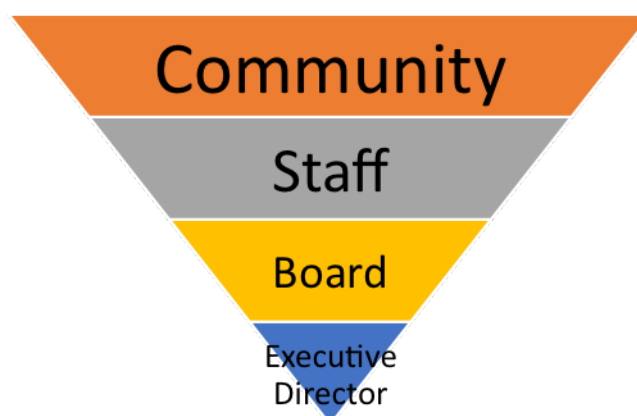
Another example of a green neighborhood is the Villages at Crest Mountain in Asheville, North Carolina. This neighborhood has garden beds and fruit trees, green buildings, net metering of solar energy, rainwater harvesting, and outdoor neighborhood activities in its many green spaces.<sup>13</sup> However, the Villages is all new-build—no existing structures were upgraded. In addition, the least expensive option in this neighborhood is around \$300,000, which excludes many of Asheville's residents.<sup>14</sup>

Following the crash of the housing market in 2008, the non-profit Restore Neighborhoods L.A. (RNLA) was created to purchase foreclosed homes and renovate them using green technologies.<sup>15</sup> They then sell the houses to first-time homebuyers earning low to moderate incomes or to developers who rent them to low-income families. Their efforts began in the city of Los Angeles, but RNLA has spread throughout the region.<sup>16</sup> This effort is similar to PUSH's work because it provides affordable, green housing to low- or moderate-income families.

The Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Development Corporation in Boston, Massachusetts, does work that is very similar to PUSH's work in the GDZ. It provides affordable housing to low- and moderate-income residents of the Jamaica Plain neighborhood, encourages community collective action, supports local businesses, and helps neighborhood residents find jobs. However, unlike PUSH's GDZ, there is not an emphasis on green development.<sup>17</sup>

## PUSH'S STRUCTURE

PUSH started out with around 6 employees<sup>18</sup> and now has over 50.<sup>19</sup> As demonstrated in the vacant lots case study, while the staff turns ideas into reality, the community guides PUSH's work. This is why PUSH considers its structure to be bottom-up: the members are the most important, followed by staff, followed by the board, followed by the executive director. Ideas flow from the members up the chain to those who can turn them into a reality. The role of the staff is not so much to come up with ideas for initiatives and campaigns but rather to interpret the needs expressed by the community to determine what PUSH can and should do to address them—which often involves community participation—and to figure out how to implement and fund new programs. Thus, PUSH is a membership-driven organization.<sup>20</sup>



Anyone can become a member of PUSH for \$5 per year, and members can pay up to \$15 for a PUSH t-shirt or hoodie in addition to membership. PUSH members are kept up-to-date with PUSH's work and have more opportunities to engage with the advocacy work as well as the community planning.<sup>21</sup> As PUSH's capacity to develop vacant property has grown, new challenges to community-engaged planning, such as the esoteric and high-technical finance process for affordable housing, have emerged. PUSH has grappled with these challenges by formalizing a Community Development Committee of residents who are trained in development and maintain regular contact with PUSH staff development professionals.



# The Planning Process

All of PUSH's work is based on the voices of the community. PUSH began in 2005 when six people went door-to-door in the West Side asking people what they would like to see change in their neighborhood. The responses were overwhelmingly about the West Side's many vacant buildings and lots, which in addition to being eyesores were making the neighborhood dangerous. Many residents also told the door-to-door canvassers that their heating bills were extremely high, leading to frequent gas shutoffs. Without gas, people would run up their electricity bills using space heaters and hotplates for staying warm and cooking, which was also dangerous.<sup>22</sup>

## COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT CASE STUDY: VACANT BUILDINGS AND LOTS

PUSH began purchasing vacant buildings and lots in 2007.<sup>23</sup> Rather than sprinkling its efforts throughout its service area on the West Side, PUSH decided to focus investment on a strategic, 25-block area. Essentially, PUSH land-banked properties, meaning that they took control of many properties in the area, even in cases where there was not funding immediately available to improve them. Improvements include converting formerly vacant lots into green space, rain gardens, and community gardens, and converting abandoned buildings into affordable housing and affordable commercial space.<sup>24</sup>

An important consideration when determining which lots to purchase is their proximity to gentrifying forces. Elmwood Village, a relatively wealthy neighborhood in Buffalo, is close to the GDZ, as is the State University of New York College at Buffalo (Buffalo State). In addition, developers are creating market rate housing along Niagara Street, which is one of the boundaries of PUSH's service area, although it is a number of blocks from the GDZ. If PUSH does not address vacant properties, other developers may purchase them and develop them into market rate, luxury, or student housing that would not serve West Side residents. Eventually, these developers could end up gentrifying the entire neighborhood, leaving the original residents with nowhere to go. In the future, PUSH may expand the boundaries of the GDZ to create a larger area that is difficult to gentrify, but for now, PUSH is concentrating its efforts to ensure that the GDZ is healthy and stable.<sup>25</sup>

### Determining How to Improve The Lots

In some cases, it was easy to decide what to do with properties. For example, buildings in decent shape could be gutted and turned into housing, which would avoid the cost of demolition and address the issue of a lack of affordable housing in the West Side. But in other cases, there was no one obvious path. Thus, PUSH decided to hold a large meeting called a Community Planning Congress that gathered residents from all over the neighborhood. Prior to the meeting, PUSH organizers knocked on every door to invite people to participate. They also posted flyers around the neighborhood to advertise.<sup>26</sup>

This first Community Planning Congress hosted neighborhood residents as well as local officials, professional planners, and PUSH's neighborhood organizers and leaders. The Congress focused on the many vacant properties in the Massachusetts Avenue corridor and had professionals design in response to what the community wanted to see happen.<sup>27</sup> A subsequent community planning meeting regarding how to repurpose vacant properties was structured to encourage street-specific input. The meeting broke people into groups based on their street of residence to determine what changes they would like to see on their street.<sup>28</sup>

Before the small-group conversations, PUSH made sure to provide background information to help guide them. Following introductions, PUSH leaders gave presentations about the history of the area that included historic maps and photos. Then, PUSH gave examples of what other cities have done to rehabilitate vacant properties as well as options for vibrant public spaces. PUSH presented and illustrated examples of five guiding principles for residents to take into consideration when planning their neighborhood: “promote sub-districts in the neighborhood, promote connections and easy access, mark gateways, highlight corners, and integrate art and nature.”<sup>29</sup>

Three questions guided the conversations: what people liked most about their street, the changes they would like to see, and the first thing they would do to improve the lots and streetscape of their street.<sup>30</sup> To aid conversations, PUSH and the architects provided aerial images and maps of the neighborhood.<sup>31</sup> Resident ideas for vacant lots included vegetable gardens, sculpture parks, dog parks, rain gardens, tree farms, bee keeping, and chess boards. For streetscape improvements, residents proposed more trash cans, birdhouses, better bus stops, green in place of pavement, bike lanes, and traffic calming measures. Clearly, some suggestions are easier to implement and have a broader benefit than others, but PUSH recorded every suggestion regardless. Specific plans for some lots resulted from this meeting, and the professionals present at the meeting—both PUSH employees and professional architects and planners—learned that people wanted cleaner streets, more trees, more recreational opportunities, and more green spaces.<sup>32</sup>

The architects working with PUSH took the information from this meeting and designed the Healthy Neighborhood Concept Plan. The Healthy Neighborhood Concept Plan included a map with callouts specifying specific treatments for different lots, areas, and intersections.<sup>33</sup> Within six months of this meeting, PUSH had transformed many vacant lots. Some parts of the Healthy Neighborhood Concept Plan did not get implemented, but the map served as a basis for future GDZ work, and it has since been converted into a map of the GDZ.<sup>34</sup>





## ENGAGING THE COMMUNITY

PUSH uses a variety of methods to get community input for its work in the GDZ. These include door-knocking, meetings, social media campaigns, and text messaging campaigns. The most effective methods for getting feedback and involvement have been door-knocking and meetings. The reason PUSH uses a variety of methods is to reach a wider audience. Not everyone can attend meetings, and not everyone has a cell phone, so by creating different pathways to participate, PUSH can better engage the community as a whole.<sup>35</sup>

### Door-knocking

Before PUSH had made a name for itself in the West Side, it was more difficult to get people to open their doors and talk. Now, people recognize PUSH's t-shirt-clad canvassers.<sup>36</sup> In the warmer months, canvassers are on the streets of the West Side almost every day.<sup>37</sup> PUSH goes door-to-door in many contexts: advertising events, offering services, garnering support, and conducting surveys.<sup>38</sup>

Prior to meetings, PUSH knocks on doors to let people know about the meetings face-to-face.<sup>39</sup> This is helpful not only because it raises awareness about the meetings but it also ensures that the information reaches people who may not be able to read or people who may not otherwise see the flyers due to mobility issues. It is also more personable to chat with someone—possibly a neighbor or a friend—about the meeting than it is to see a flyer.

PUSH also goes door-to-door to inform West Side residents of programs such as weatherization and downspout disconnections. People learn that there is funding available to weatherize their homes if they are eligible, which would help them save money in the wintertime, and people learn about the citywide issue of combined sewer overflows, which directly affect many West Side residents who fish or swim in Buffalo's natural water bodies.<sup>40</sup>



When going door-to-door to determine the community's needs and opinions, PUSH canvassers generally have a topic that they are addressing, but they try to avoid asking leading questions. For example, instead of asking a question such as, "Would you like to see senior housing in School 77?" they might ask, "What type of housing, if any, would you like to see in School 77?" with a list of options to choose from. By doing this, PUSH is ensuring that it is not just gaining support for what is best or most convenient for PUSH but rather, it is learning what is best for the West Side.<sup>41</sup>

Going door-to-door also creates an opportunity for individual conversations, whereas at meetings, individual voices may get diluted and mixed into the voice of a small group. Talking to people is what catalyzed PUSH's creation, and it is what keeps PUSH active.<sup>42</sup> All of PUSH's plans and actions come out of one-on-one conversations. What PUSH hears in these conversations inspires community actions.<sup>43</sup>

## Meetings

PUSH holds regular meetings that are open to the community. These include the monthly committee meetings and the annual Community Planning Congress. In addition, there are sometimes other meetings such as design charrettes to address more specific issues or projects. Meetings mix verbal, visual, and written methods to allow people to communicate in their preferred method. They are open to the public and primarily attended by neighborhood residents, PUSH members, community leaders, faith-based organization representatives, service-providing organization representatives, officeholders, and professional architects hired by PUSH.<sup>44</sup>

Meetings often start out with a presentation that serves to orient people to the topic and to explain the options for the project. These presentations are vital opportunities to provide education to the community.<sup>45</sup> For example, through its interactions with community members, PUSH realized that many people do not understand how gentrification works. At the next meeting, PUSH made sure to explain what gentrification is, how it influences PUSH's work, why people need to consider it when deciding which projects to complete, and how PUSH's work influences gentrification. In the process, PUSH heard back about individuals' experiences with gentrification in the GDZ. PUSH wanted to stress that its projects could unintentionally cause gentrification. When PUSH rehabilitates a house or creates more green spaces, surrounding property owners may raise the value of their properties with minimal improvements because of their proximity to a nicer property or to an aesthetically pleasing garden.<sup>46</sup>

Many of PUSH's meetings involve maps. At meetings, residents

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may be asked to draw, place sticky notes, or move around cards representing different uses on a map in small groups. These types of activities are engaging and require participants to actively use their experiential knowledge of the neighborhood to propose relevant and specific solutions. Groups may generate a list of proposals that get boiled down to key ideas. At the end of each meeting, PUSH facilitators ask each group to report back their ideas. Usually, these reports at the end of the meeting will be guided by focus questions to help the group share the most important and useful information.<sup>47</sup>

## Committee Meetings

PUSH has three committees that members can join that meet monthly, though the meetings are open to the public so as to not exclude any voices. The three committees are the Community Building Committee, the Community Development Committee, and the Energy Democracy Committee. These committees allow West Side residents to have a stake in PUSH's work and help guide PUSH's projects. A typical committee meeting involves around 10 to 15 residents and two PUSH staff members to facilitate the conversation.

## Text Message Campaigns

To participate in a text message campaign, West Side residents are asked to text "PUSH" to a phone number corresponding to a text message campaign service. The service then sends out PUSH's customized messages and allows the residents to send their feedback to survey questions. The results then get sent to a database that PUSH can view and manage.

PUSH used this campaigning technique to get feedback on what the community would like to see happen to the two lots adjacent to the Massachusetts Avenue Park in the GDZ. The results were then used to guide the Community Development Committee meeting on the same subject. Flyers posted around the GDZ publicized and explained the campaign.<sup>48</sup>

## Social Media Campaigns

Social media campaigns are typically used to demonstrate support for a cause or raise awareness of a service. For example, PUSH has taken advantage of this type of campaigning to market the weatherization services available to residents of all income levels in Erie County and the free home assessments provided by PUSH Green. They incentivized referring people to this PUSH Green energy savings program through their online referral form by providing gift certificates to those who referred the most people to the program. For this campaign, PUSH encouraged people to use the hashtag #ShareTheSavings.<sup>49</sup>



## Community Planning Congress

Each year, PUSH holds a Community Planning Congress. It is often from these large meetings that PUSH decides which projects to focus on in the upcoming year. The Congresses are open to the public and attended by West Side residents, employees of other nonprofits, professional architects commissioned by PUSH, and officeholders. PUSH ensures that there is childcare available throughout the day of the Congress, which is typically held in a nearby high school from 2-6 on a Saturday.<sup>50</sup> Prior to the Congress, PUSH goes door-to-door, hangs posters, and phone banks to advertise it to the community.<sup>51</sup>

Congresses typically start out with an opening presentation during which PUSH staff explain the focus of the meeting and may share an educational presentation. Then, attendees are broken into at least ten small groups of 10-15 people and a trained facilitator. The facilitator is typically a PUSH employee, Community Development Committee member, or Zone Leader who has gone through a training session prior to the Congress.<sup>52</sup>

The small groups are asked to do various activities and hold discussions. For example, the 2016 Community Planning Congress included a roleplay activity intended to educate people about gentrification from different people's points of view. In this activity, each group member is asked to read a card with a different person's opinion—for example, someone may be a housing developer and someone else may be a resident in an area being gentrified—to have a well-rounded understanding of gentrification. How do these views compare to people's lived experiences? What does PUSH need to consider regarding gentrification when deciding which vacant lots to purchase?<sup>53</sup>

The small groups then receive maps to discuss what they would like to see and where. In the 2016 Community Planning Congress, the maps were useful to see where gentrifying forces are most active and where PUSH can and should work to prevent people from being priced out of the West Side. A person assigned to the position of note-taker writes down everyone's contributions, either on a large board or in a notebook, so that everyone's voice is recorded.<sup>54</sup> The groups are then asked to report back to the entire Congress. Following these presentations, the attendees prioritize what they have heard and vote on what PUSH should work on in the upcoming year. Finally, everyone discusses the next steps that PUSH will take.<sup>55</sup>

## Community Involvement Case Study: School 77

During the 2014 Community Planning Congress, people were very concerned about the future of School 77, a public school just outside the GDZ that was closed in 2008. The City of Buffalo asked potential developers to submit plans for the building's redevelopment. Through community planning meetings, PUSH developed a proposal for the future of School 77.<sup>56</sup>

PUSH began the meeting by presenting what it considered to be the feasible options for the building. This may seem like it limits the options that community members can choose from, but in actuality, it sparks people's thinking by showing potential uses they may not have thought of. During the meetings, PUSH made it clear that there was going to be housing in the school because at its core, PUSH is a housing organization. PUSH also made it clear that they were open to all suggestions, but some suggestions—no matter how good—would not be feasible with the resources and partnerships that PUSH has. For example, although residents of the West Side would benefit from a clinic in School 77, no clinic wanted to move into the building. Using an aerial image of the school, small groups used cards to code for the different uses they would like to see in the school and its landscaping.<sup>57</sup>

Based on the community input, PUSH developed plans to put 30 affordable housing units for senior citizens, while also moving its offices into the building and making space for two non-profit theater groups.<sup>58</sup> If it proves feasible, the rooftop will serve as a community solar farm that allows West Side residents to buy a share of the solar power generated by School 77's future solar panels to offset a portion of their monthly energy bills.<sup>59</sup>

## Struggling with Language Barriers

Because the West Side is home to many immigrants and refugees, there are many people with limited English proficiency. At Lafayette High School, a public school serving many of the West Side's youth, over 40 languages are spoken.<sup>60</sup> While the youth learn English quickly in school, there are many adults with very little English. It has been challenging for PUSH to ensure that the voices of immigrants and refugees are accurately and completely represented because there are so many different language communities that PUSH needs to hear from.

Spanish has been the easiest language to account for because of the large Spanish-speaking population in the West Side.<sup>61</sup> Spanish speakers have lived in the GDZ since the middle of the previous century, so many of these families' children are now bilingual adults.<sup>62</sup> For those who speak Spanish exclusively, PUSH has materials printed in Spanish as well as Spanish-speaking staff and canvassers.<sup>63</sup>

It has been difficult communicating with speakers of languages other than English and Spanish. For example, while there is a significantly large population of refugees from Burma in the West Side, they speak many different languages and dialects, making it significantly more difficult to have the appropriate materials and interpreters when trying to hear from the Burmese community.<sup>64</sup> In addition, because of the governmental oppression they experienced in Burma, many Burmese refugees are nervous that by speaking out as a part of PUSH, they will get in trouble with the government.<sup>65</sup>

To address language barriers, PUSH reaches out to bilingual community leaders, asking them to convey information back to the communities and to get their feedback. However, the risk of this approach is that the leaders may not convey everyone's voices.<sup>66</sup> Community leaders may also be responsible for explaining what PUSH is and dispelling concerns about being a PUSH member.<sup>67</sup> So far, PUSH has had a good experience working with community leaders.<sup>68</sup> In the future, PUSH hopes to provide leadership training to bilingual community leaders so that they can better help their communities be represented in the planning process.<sup>69</sup> PUSH would like to have interpreters for different languages at

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their annual Community Planning Congress, but thus far the expense has been prohibitive.<sup>70</sup>

Recently, PUSH has partnered with a startup newspaper, Karibu News, aimed at immigrants and refugees. PUSH's newsletter will be published every other week in Karibu, and it is possible that it will be published in different languages in the future to better reach immigrant and refugee communities.<sup>71</sup>

## LEADERSHIP TRAINING

PUSH provides leadership training to interested community members as well as its staff through various means, including popular education workshops. Developing leadership within the community is beneficial to PUSH because community leaders can share PUSH's work, encourage community participation, and bring back their communities' stories to PUSH. The leadership training is designed to educate people so that they better understand PUSH's work and can help their neighbors better understand as well. This way, West Side residents can come to PUSH's meetings with the necessary understanding to do analysis and propose relevant, practical solutions. Staff also benefit from leadership training because they may understand their own work very deeply but be less informed about other PUSH projects. A better understanding of other projects allows staff to more thoughtfully contribute to those projects and to be able to better explain them to interested community members.<sup>72</sup>

## Partnerships

PUSH often partners with other organizations. For example, many of the employees for PUSH's construction come from programs such as Youth Build, the Center for Employment Opportunities, and the Outsource Center. By partnering with these organizations, PUSH is ensuring that workers who may traditionally be at a disadvantage for employment are working. Youth Build recruits at-risk youth from the neighborhood, the Center for Employment Opportunities helps people find employment opportunities following incarceration, and the Outsource Center is a grassroots organization that provides job training to residents of low-income East Side neighborhoods.<sup>73</sup>

PUSH also partners with other organizations to take on larger projects. For example, PUSH has partnered with Housing Visions, a development company based in Syracuse, NY, that revitalizes low- to moderate-income neighborhoods and has experience helping special needs populations. Housing Visions is proficient at "creating complex deal structures and accessing complex financing."<sup>74</sup> When PUSH partners with organizations such as Housing Visions, they are transparent with the community about their motives and outcomes. PUSH makes sure to connect with the community to ensure that despite partnering with an outside organization, they are still serving the community well.<sup>75</sup>

# Initiatives Within the Green Development Zone

The Green Development Zone is a holistic collection of initiatives. These include ways of creating green and affordable housing, taking over vacant lots to better serve the community, making gathering places, assisting with arts and cultural organizations and projects, and generating more opportunities for locals to gain employment in green jobs.

## GREEN AND AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Often, the idea of green housing is associated with costliness. However, to PUSH, green housing and affordability go together. Homes that are not green end up costing homeowners and renters more in gas and energy bills. In Buffalo, a poorly insulated home can rack up a restrictively expensive heating bill during the wintertime, and many residents of these homes have had their gas cut off because they cannot afford to pay their bills.

## Development Without Displacement

PUSH's organizing and development is aligned with the national *Development Without Displacement* movement, which views gentrification as threat to community stability and resilience. PUSH's mission is to grow communities without displacing residents, thereby maintaining the fabric of the neighborhood. To do this, PUSH created the Buffalo Neighborhood Stabilization Company (BNSC), a nonprofit development company, in 2009. By having a separate organization handling development and property management, PUSH limits its financial liability.<sup>76</sup> BNSC aims to own and improve at least 20% of the community's housing stock in order to prevent rapid gentrification.<sup>77</sup>

It is advantageous to acquire properties as early as possible and to constantly search for funding sources. It can also be useful to work with other developers, such as Housing Visions, that bring additional capacity.<sup>78</sup>

In general, BNSC has utilized a scattered site, residential affordable housing model and has engaged in only a few mixed-use projects. BNSC does only affordable housing, not mixed-income, because the market is supplying enough higher income units and the neighborhood is already becoming more mixed-income.<sup>79</sup> All units are affordable and reserved for tenants with low income, and all units are green and energy efficient.

PUSH and BNSC own over 100 properties.<sup>80</sup> As of summer 2016, 75 units of housing in over 20 buildings had been acquired and renovated, with plans to create 46 more units in the pipeline.<sup>81</sup> Funding comes from Low Income Housing Tax Credits, New York State HOME Funds from the New York State



Homes and Community Renewal Office, New York State's Small Projects Initiatives program, the State of New York Housing Trust Fund, New York State's Urban Initiatives program, and HOME Buffalo funds.<sup>82</sup> The Massachusetts Avenue Community Homes Project follows guidelines from the Energy Efficiency & Green Building Performance Initiative through New York State Homes and Community Renewal and NYSEERDA's Energy Star Labeled Homes Program.<sup>83</sup>

## **PUSH's NetZero House**

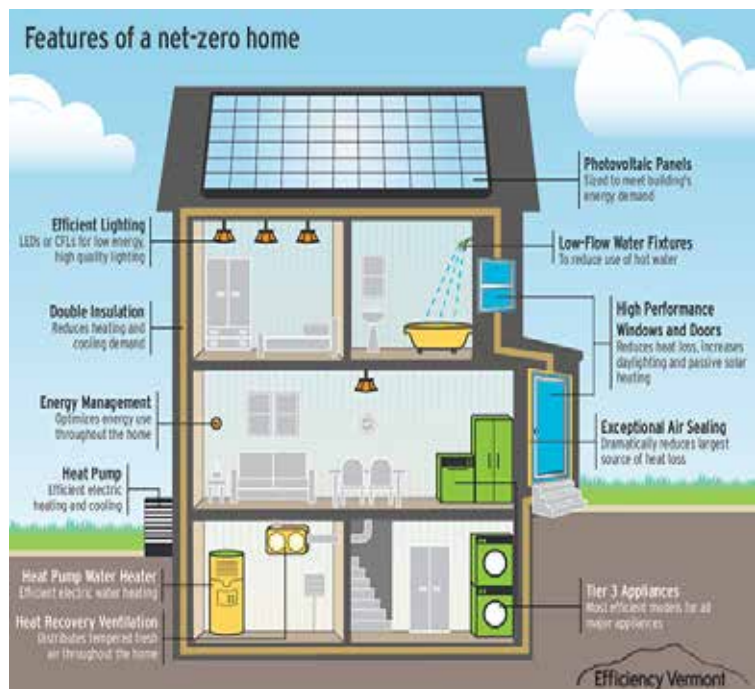
In 2011, PUSH completed its NetZero House at 10 Winter Street, which is the first of its kind in the region. It is also the first home in the city of Buffalo to use a vacant lot for geothermal heating, a system that generates all of the house's heat. PUSH obtained 10 Winter Street for \$2,200 through an auction for abandoned houses.<sup>84</sup>

A net zero house generates all of its energy. Buffalo's NetZero House was also created to provide affordable housing for low-income families by cutting the costs of electric, heat, and gas bills. The house is designed to reduce pollution and greenhouse gas emissions and serve as a model of energy efficiency and renewable energy technology. It also demonstrates that vacant properties can be repurposed productively and beautify the street.<sup>85</sup>

The NetZero House has a solar photovoltaic system, geothermal heating, super insulation, a ventilation system, a metal roof, and a solar thermal system. These features cost around \$50,000.<sup>86</sup>

## **Weatherization of Homes in the GDZ**

PUSH helps homeowners and renters in the GDZ to weatherize their homes to keep the costs of heat and electricity affordable. Weatherization efforts include improving insulation, heating and cooling systems, electrical systems, and electricity-consuming appliances. Although the upfront costs of weatherization can be daunting, the efforts will result in savings for 10-30 years. On average, the value of weatherization improvements is 2.2 times greater than the cost.<sup>87</sup> Not only is weatherization beneficial for the house's residents, but it also reduces the house's carbon footprint. After weatherization, homes tend to use 32% less gas and emit 1.62 fewer metric tons of carbon dioxide per year.<sup>88</sup>





Funding for weatherization projects is available through the 2009 Green Jobs – Green New York Act, which PUSH utilizes through PUSH Green.<sup>89</sup> Founded in 2012, PUSH Green offers free home energy audits and, depending on income, free or reduced-price weatherization.<sup>90</sup> To make the weatherization process simpler for applicants, PUSH handles home screening and paperwork. They help find ways to fund the projects, and following improvements, they monitor the price of bills to determine the efficiency of the weatherization.<sup>91</sup> PUSH Green also teaches residents how to weatherize their homes through classes and workshops. As of mid-2016, PUSH Green had completed over 550 weatherizations in the region, including 200 in the GDZ.<sup>92</sup> PUSH had put \$739,742.81 back into the Green Development Zone for installed projects by the end of 2014.<sup>93</sup>



## Challenges of Weatherization

Weatherization programs are typically hard to market because they are complicated and because many people have had bad experiences with dishonest home renovation contractors. PUSH was able to use its community organizing skills and its trusted status as a non-profit to market PUSH Green effectively both in and out of the GDZ. PUSH also tabled at local festivals and worked with politicians to spread the word about weatherization and ways to fund it.<sup>94</sup>

Another challenge was weatherizing rented homes. Approximately 75% of Buffalo renters pay their own utilities.<sup>95</sup> Rental property owners can apply for discounted weatherization, but demonstrating the low-income status of their tenants is a barrier, in part because privacy rules may prevent the owners from getting that information. However, while weatherization programs require owner approval, low-income tenants can be the applicants. Weatherization is beneficial to landlords because they want to retain their tenants, but high utilities costs are a huge reason why tenants cannot afford rent and may be forced to move.<sup>96</sup>

It is important to make sure that owners cannot get their properties renovated and then raise the rent and remove the low-income tenants. When a landlord agrees to get their property weatherized, they also have to sign a contract saying that they cannot evict their tenants without just cause and that they cannot raise the rent for at least two years.<sup>97</sup>



## GREENING VACANT LOTS AND THE NEIGHBORHOOD

Vacant lots blight communities as magnets for crime and litter; they are eye-catching signs of neighborhood disinvestment, leading to lower property values and fueling more abandonment. Repurposing vacant lots can impact the character of the neighborhood. Turning “eye sore” vacant lots into functional “green spaces” is a cost-effective strategy for neighborhood renewal<sup>98</sup>

PUSH has been able to take over 100 vacant lots in the GDZ into its possession.<sup>99</sup> Uses range from “clean and green” lots to community gardens, all of which have had a positive impact on the GDZ by eyesores into assets: properties that add value to the neighborhood rather than subtracting from it.<sup>100</sup> All of the uses for previously vacant lots in the GDZ are inspired by community needs.<sup>101</sup> The pictures below show a vacant lot before and after greening by PUSH.



### Clean and Green Lots and Rain Gardens

The simplest option on PUSH’s vacant lot menu is to “clean and green” it. As seen in the example below, from 37 19<sup>th</sup> St., cleaning and greening involves clearing all debris, grading, and seeding the lot with grass, and then marking it with a very simple wooden fence in front, possibly with plantings. This relatively inexpensive, easy to maintain treatment offers neighborhood children a safe, appealing place to play and sends a message that the neighborhood is cared for. Maintenance involves weekly mowing, trash pick-up, and inspection, as well as weeding, mulching, fence maintenance, and seasonal snow removal. The 6 fence posts and 30 feet of lumber costs about \$200, or \$1,000 if professionally installed.



## Community Gardens

Community gardens benefit communities by producing fresh produce while providing exercise, learning opportunities, and a place to meet others of all ages and backgrounds from the neighborhood. PUSH's two community gardens provide plots for 45 neighborhood families. This initiative has been very successful. The gardens give a diverse group of people (including many refugees from Burma) the opportunity to have a small stake and to plant all kinds of fruits and vegetables, some of which would not otherwise be available to them outside of their native countries or regions. The gardens tend to be most active in the evening, and typical tasks consist of planting, weeding, watering, and harvesting. Gardens can serve as a place for residents to gather and socialize, despite language barriers that may be overcome with hand gestures and the exchange of food. Once a year, PUSH hosts a barbecue for the gardening families to come together for food pairing and festivities.

The Hampshire Street Vegetable Garden, pictured below, is comprised of fifteen 200 sq. ft. individual raised beds, which local residents may garden for an annual fee of \$25. PUSH learned from experience that a small fee helps insure that the gardeners who sign up for lots are fully committed to working on them. Having initially eschewed fences and gates for its gardens, PUSH learned from the gardeners themselves that a locked fence provides a sense of ownership and security.

This garden cost approximately \$16,000 for acquisition and preparation of lots and a gated fence. It costs approximately \$2,800 per year in maintenance, \$425 in property tax and \$1,050 in insurance.

Another interesting example is the Birds, Bees, and Butterflies Garden at 445 W. Ferry St., pictured below, which is specially designed with plants that flower through the seasons and attract pollinators. This garden cost roughly \$2,000, including fencing materials, topsoil, mulch, and perennial flowers.

THE PUSH WORK  
TRANSFORMS AN  
UGLY VACANT LOT  
INTO A BEAUTIFUL  
GARDEN. IT  
SIGNALS TO  
OTHERS THAT  
SOMEONE CARES  
ABOUT THE  
LOT, REDUCING  
DUMPING, CRIME,  
AND VANDALISM.  
IT ALSO GIVES  
NEIGHBORS AN  
OPPORTUNITY  
FOR SAFE PASSIVE  
AND ACTIVE  
RECREATIONAL  
SPACE.



## Green Infrastructure: Stormwater Management

Buffalo, like many older industrial cities, has a significant problem with combined sewer overflows. On Buffalo's West Side, sewage overflows are discharged into the Black Rock Canal and Scajaquada Creek, which flow into the Niagara River, where many neighborhood residents swim and fish. The overflows, added to the legacy contamination from the area's industries, have made the Niagara River an Area of Concern for the International Joint Commission that governs the Great Lakes.

Health impacts range from gastrointestinal illness to rashes after water exposure. The region's public beaches automatically close whenever more than a half inch of rain falls, due to contamination from sewer outfalls, but many residents venture into the water outside of beach areas. In the City of Buffalo, where there are no public bathing beaches, young people frequently swim in unauthorized spaces, such as the Black Rock Canal at the foot of West Ferry Street – very near the outflow of the Albany Street CSO.

Other residents face even worse health impacts from eating fish out of the Niagara River – the third most popular freshwater fishery in the US. Fish consumption is a source of sustenance for many of the refugees and people with low incomes in the neighborhood. For residents of the West Side, addressing environmental issues such as combined sewer overflows is a matter of survival.

The PUSH Blue project involves a variety of storm water management interventions throughout the GDZ. The project will include rain gardens and bioswales, downspout disconnects, stormwater harvesting for two large community gardens, passive irrigation for urban agriculture sites, permeable pavers, living walls, and green roofs on 25 PUSH-owned sites, as well as a rain barrel program for local property owners. The 25 projects will be done over the course of two years. All of these projects keep stormwater out of the sewer system and thus prevent combined sewer overflows.

The majority of PUSH Blue projects will be on sites owned by PUSH. Already, PUSH has developed rain gardens on some of its lots and has incorporated stormwater retention strategies, such as dry wells and downspout disconnections, on the housing it has developed. PUSH will also work with property owners of adjacent structures on downspout disconnections and will provide free rain barrels to aid in downspout disconnects for 200 houses throughout the neighborhood.

To build a rain garden, PUSH uses native plants adapted to the region and to the unique growing conditions of rain gardens. PUSH uses large and small aggregate stone in the base of rain gardens for water holding capacity, and a free-draining soil mix with a high percentage of compost for the upper planting layer. A typical PUSH rain garden will capture over 14,000 gallons of stormwater annually.

Drywell and  
Rain Garden:  
NetZero House at  
10 Winter St.:

There are two forms of stormwater capture at this location. Most of the downspouts are directed to a drywell in the vacant lot next door. A drywell is an underground pit of large stone. The large voids between stones provide space for stormwater to collect while it slowly seeps further into the ground. PUSH also installed a small rain garden near the front entrance to the house to capture rainwater and provide visual interest.



For the residents of those homes, PUSH Blue's work can have some added benefits. The downspout disconnection ensures that water is properly moved away from a house during a rain event. Many houses in Buffalo currently have wet basements due to cracked, broken, or poorly planned sewer connections. Safely bringing that water away ensures that foundations are not undermined. Homeowners also have a vacant lot next to their house beautified, which creates a more livable space for them as well as potentially increasing their property values. (Research in Philadelphia has shown marked increases in property values due to the cleaning and greening of nearby vacant lots.<sup>102</sup>

The gardens are designed to beautify the neighborhood as well as capture stormwater, so maintenance is similar to other forms of landscaping: major clean-up and mulching spring and fall with light weeding throughout the growing season. The cost of the rain gardens ranges from \$1000 to \$5000, depending on the size of the lot, the depth of excavation and backfill required, and the condition of the lot when the project starts (for example, how much debris does it contain). Local residents will be involved in the design process for some of the gardens.

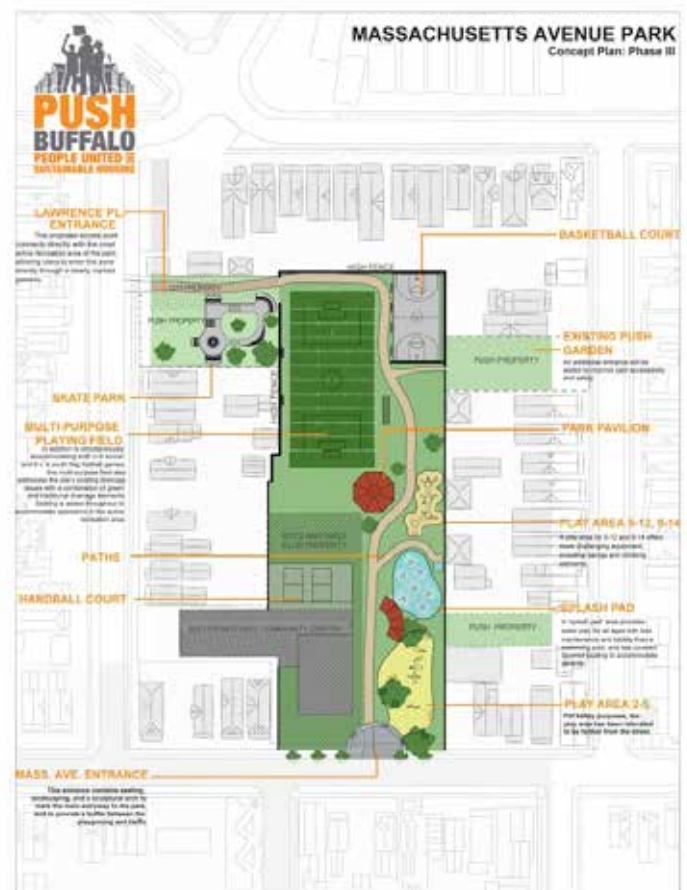
The community's response to PUSH Blue has been enthusiastic. As PUSH's Jenifer Kaminsky says, "Once we begin to explain the issue, people want to address it. They don't want their kids swimming in dirty water, eating toxic fish, or smelling bad smells. People also really love gardens on their street." PUSH's work in cleaning and beautifying vacant lots also has a ripple effect, as residents become more inspired to clean up and garden other lots, and less prone to dump into vacant lots. PUSH workers have noticed far fewer sofas and other trash being dumped since they began their efforts.

## THE MASSACHUSETTS AVENUE PARK

The Massachusetts Avenue Park is a city park located within the GDZ. It is within walking distance of more than 5,000 families and more than fifteen community agencies, including the Butler Mitchell Boys and Girls Club, which borders the park. The park is one of the largest publicly owned green spaces in the West Side.<sup>103</sup>

The park was once a focal point for the West Side community, but in the mid-1980s it became a broken-down, unkempt, and dangerous plot of land.<sup>104</sup> In 2009, PUSH organizers went door-to-door, talking with West Side residents about what changes they wanted to see. The park was a major eyesore for the neighborhood, and with many families living in multi-unit homes, there was nowhere safe for people to get together or for kids to play. While residents had different ideas for what should be done with the park, everyone agreed that something needed to be done.<sup>105</sup>

PUSH organizers brought potential plans and ideas to city officials, including Mayor Byron Brown. Their efforts helped to release over \$350,000 of city funds, and, as a result, the park received safety improvements, new park entrances and paths, fencing around







the entire perimeter, a multi-use athletic field, and a pavilion. The playing field hosts youth soccer and flag football games with ample seating for spectators.<sup>106</sup>

Studies show that metropolitan communities with minorities and immigrants have roughly one acre of park space for every 1,000 residents, while white neighborhoods have over 30 acres.<sup>107</sup> By creating the Massachusetts Avenue Park, PUSH sought to go against this trend. The positive effects of a park tend to ripple into all aspects of a community. A park affords neighborhoods a common meeting place, which can encourage community action and progress. For example, PUSH held Solar Jam in July of 2015 as a day of fun in the park where people could learn about PUSH's new solar program.<sup>108</sup>



# The Massachusetts Avenue Project (MAP)

Massachusetts Avenue Project (MAP) is one of PUSH's most important partners in the Green Development Zone. MAP is a non-profit organization that was created by neighborhood residents in 1992. Its mission is to create a local food system that serves the needs and wants of the area's population while promoting local job opportunities. MAP wants to make affordable, nutritious, fresh food more easily accessible. Social change education is central to its operations. MAP develops vacant lots into productive green spaces, grows food for the local communities, and beautifies the neighborhood.<sup>109</sup> It addresses the issue of the West Side's food desert, where there is limited access to healthy, affordable food.<sup>110</sup>

One of the key reasons that PUSH chose to anchor the GDZ around Massachusetts Avenue in 2008 was that MAP had already done so much work to make the neighborhood more sustainable, including its landmark urban farm. The MAP Urban Farm at 389 Massachusetts consists of over an acre of 13 reclaimed vacant lots located in the GDZ. The farm includes a 1,000-gallon rainwater catchment system, garden beds, greenhouses, chickens, a composting system, and aquaponics systems where fish and plants are raised in a symbiotic system. The food produced is sold by the MAP farm stand; the Mobile Market vegetable truck, which travels to low-income neighborhoods with limited access to fresh food; and a community supported agriculture project (CSA).<sup>111</sup>



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## MAP'S GROWING GREEN PROGRAM

The Growing Green Program, created in 2003, has generated hundreds of jobs for Buffalo's youth. Through the Growing Green Program, youth in the community grow, market and distribute organic produce for the local community, restaurants, and businesses. The Program produces food, creates training opportunities, and provides youth with jobs and educational opportunities.<sup>113</sup>

Growing Green Works (GGW) is a locally owned and operated business venture run and managed by the youth, which creates, markets and sells products made from the farm's produce, such as salsa and a chili starter kit. The youth learn business skills, and all the profits go toward youth development and urban agriculture in Buffalo.<sup>114</sup> Youth also work on the Mobile Market, which is a series of farm stands that run from June to November



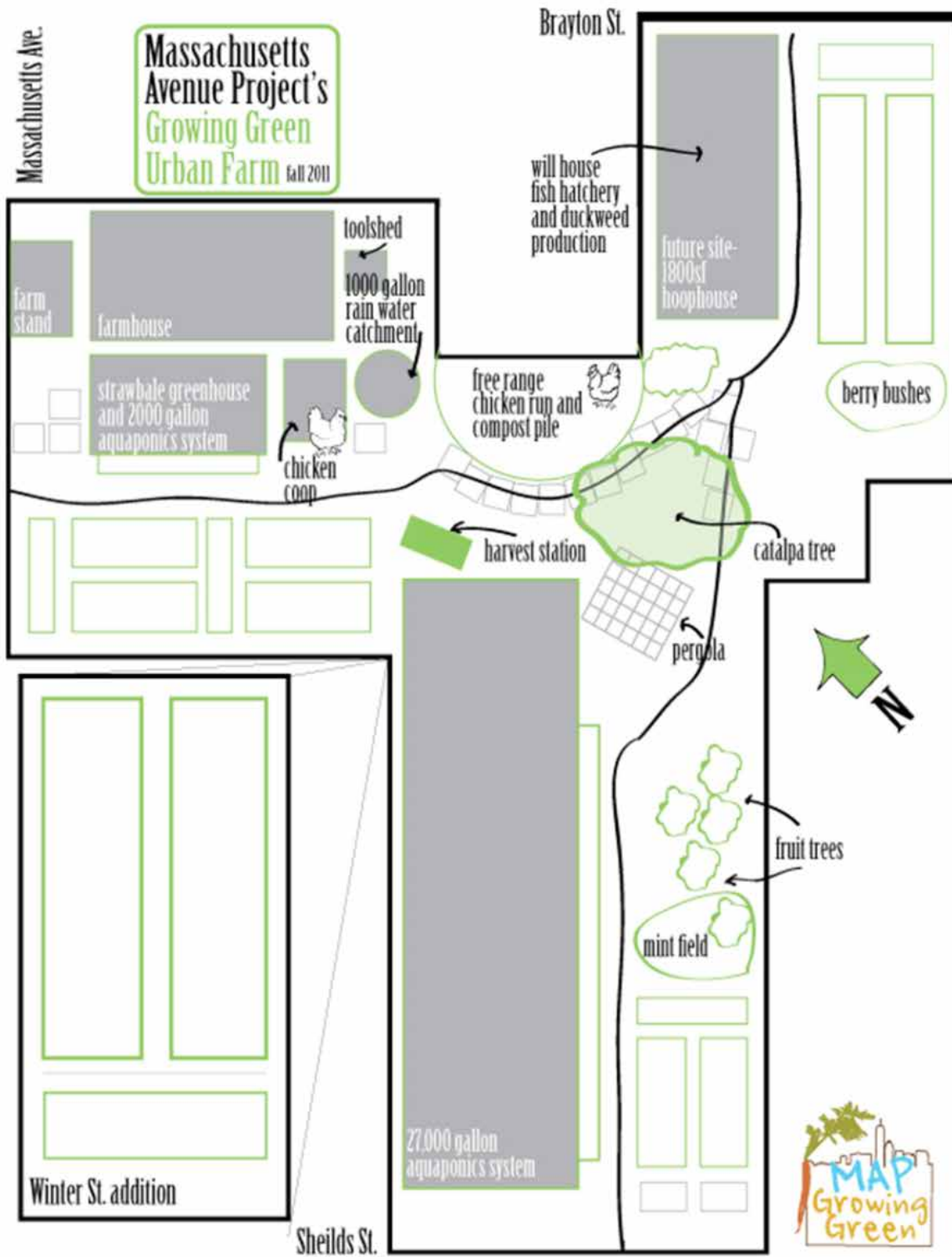




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every week. The Mobile Market truck transports food to parts of Buffalo which have limited access to fresh food.<sup>115</sup>

Over the past four years, 95% of the high school seniors involved in Growing Green have graduated from high school and continued onto higher education. In 2013 alone, the Project employed and trained 42 teens, produced and distributed 15,000 pounds of food (including 72 varieties of fruits, vegetables, herbs, eggs, chicken and fish), composted nearly 500,000 pounds of food waste, and provided 2,300 low-income households with nutritious and affordable food.<sup>116</sup>





# Arts and Culture

In addition to its initiatives for sustainable housing and revitalization of vacant lots, the GDZ also encourages the development of arts and cultural spaces within its bounds. PUSH has supported several allies in providing arts and culture, in addition to integrating arts and culture into its own work. Projects range from murals to a theater company to a laundromat-turned-community-center.

## THE WESTSIDE ART STRATEGY HAPPENINGS (WASH) PROJECT

A reporter for *The Buffalo News* describes the WASH Project perfectly: “Some neighbors come here to draw, paint or read. Others stop by to shoot pool, surf the Internet or take ESL classes. Poets appeared for open-mic nights, soccer players and urban gardeners convene here, and noise musicians play candlelit concerts at night. Everyone else comes to do laundry.”<sup>118</sup>

The WASH Project is part laundromat, part creative art space, and part resource center for all members of Buffalo’s West Side community. It serves as an informal meeting space for refugees and long-standing members of the neighborhood. It facilitates open communication between people who may not interact otherwise because of language and cultural barriers.<sup>119</sup> Early on, founder Za Win put a pool table in the building to create more community. He later partnered with local artist and librarian, Barrett Gordon, to make the WASH Project what it is today.<sup>120</sup>

The WASH Project’s relationship with PUSH started when a PUSH member came to Win’s door asking what he would like to see in the neighborhood. As a result, PUSH later purchased the WASH Project’s building in order to ensure that the building’s rent would stay affordable. An affordable building for WASH ensures the organization’s longevity and makes it a stable community space.<sup>121</sup>

The WASH Project building’s mural honors the Burmese community by displaying Burma’s student-led “National League for Democracy” movement flag. The painting is a reminder of the political conflict in Burma that has led so many refugees to Buffalo. The mural was painted by local artist Nicholas Conrad Miller.<sup>122</sup>



## UJIMA COMPANY, INC.

Ujima is a professional theater company that strives to preserve and share African-American theater. It is a multi-ethnic and multicultural company that employs established and rising artists. The company's name itself reflects its mission: "ujima" means "collective work and responsibility" in Swahili.<sup>123</sup>

Ujima strives to employ artists of color, who all too often are overlooked and underrepresented in theater. In addition to performance, Ujima serves as a resource to persons, community agencies, and institutions serving non-violence, cultural diversity, and at-risk youth.<sup>124</sup>

Ujima will find a new home in PUSH's School 77 project, with space for organizing, rehearsing, and performing. It will also provide more opportunities, resources, and exposure to the arts for residents of the West Side. By incorporating cultural organizations into School 77 instead of high-end or commercial development, PUSH is helping to keep the neighborhood vital while resisting gentrification.

## PEACE OF THE CITY MINISTRIES

Peace of the City is a Christian organization that provides resources and programs for youth. They aim to help students to do well in school, become leaders, and escape poverty. Because over 80 percent of public school students in Buffalo come from families with low incomes, Peace of the City has located in neighborhoods with high poverty rates to help these students take advantage of opportunities to succeed.<sup>125</sup>

The programs that Peace of the City provides include youth productions of Shakespeare plays, help with literacy, a homework club, teen empowerment and mentorship through creative and academic endeavors, and various other arts projects.<sup>126</sup> Peace of the City is already on the West Side, but it will have more space when it relocates to School 77.

## THE GRANT STREET NEIGHBORHOOD CENTER

Since 2010, the first floor of the former Grant Street Library has served as a community and youth center as part of PUSH's community revitalization efforts. It is now known as the Grant Street Neighborhood Center, or the Center at 271 Grant Street.<sup>127</sup> It will stay on Grant Street, but PUSH's offices in that building will move to School 77.<sup>128</sup> Although Grant Street is outside of the GDZ, many of the youth living within the bounds of the GDZ come to the Center.

The Center's mission is to provide an "Open, Productive and Safe" space for youth to do homework, participate in academic and political education programs, as well as attend (and host) large-scale community social events year-round. The Center is open to the public, but most of its regular members are between the age of 10 and 20 years. About sixty youth visit the center every day. These youths are native-born Buffalonians as well as immigrants from Burma, Kenya, Puerto Rico, and Somalia. They are part of the core of PUSH. The youth are encouraged to get involved and be leaders in social justice campaigns.<sup>129</sup>

The Center is open on weekday evenings.<sup>130</sup> Youth are encouraged to do homework before socializing with their peers and playing games. The Center's four



employees are present to help with homework and to tutor for state exams. In addition to the homework help and games, the center hosts several weekly programs that include a drum circle, African dance class, drawing classes, graphic design classes, bicycle repair workshops, Girl Talk, and Guy Talk.<sup>131</sup>

When the Center first opened, overcoming cultural differences presented the biggest challenge. There were tensions and conflicts between youth from different backgrounds, which led to groups segregating themselves into cultural cliques. The Center overcame this challenge by moving away from strict rules to value-based rules. The Center hired employees from the neighborhood that spoke the languages and knew the cultures of the youth that come to the center. Today, there is very little cultural conflict at the center. When there is a conflict, instead of a conversation about rules and enforcement, youth are encouraged to analyze their behavior and enter into a conversation of social values.





# Sustainable Jobs for Local Residents

Unemployment is a huge issue among residents of the GDZ, as is the prevalence of poverty-wage jobs. In the census tract that encompasses the majority of the Green Development Zone, the unemployment rate is nearly 20%, and the median household income is \$16,000 per year, with 28% earning less than \$10,000 per year.<sup>132</sup> This is why PUSH strives to find and create quality jobs nearby and to provide job training for West Side residents. PUSH believes that quality jobs paying at least family-raising wages are an absolute prerequisite to a sustainable neighborhood economy, which is also why PUSH supports the “fight for \$15,” a national movement to increase the minimum wage to \$15 per hour.<sup>133</sup>

In order to address this issue, PUSH Buffalo and its subsidiaries, PUSH Green and PUSH Blue are hiring neighborhood workers for construction and landscaping projects. Some of these projects involve building PUSH housing units. Some projects involve installing shrubs or other infrastructure for PUSH Green or PUSH Blue, which is focused on managing storm water. In other cases, the workers in crews hired by PUSH work as subcontractors for local developers on larger residential and commercial construction projects.<sup>134</sup>

PUSH recognizes its employees’ challenges and helps out whenever possible. This includes providing employees with “wraparound services,” including legal support and financial advising where necessary. PUSH also provides transportation passes to workers without a car or other reliable transportation to consistently travel to and from the job site.<sup>135</sup>

The majority of hires simply walk into the office at 458 Massachusetts Avenue looking for a job, having heard about PUSH through word of mouth. As PUSH is dedicated to helping out West Side neighborhood residents, they don’t excessively market the program to potential workers outside the area.<sup>136</sup> PUSH’s Quality Jobs’ waiting list ranges from 50 to 60 people seeking jobs, depending on what work is currently available. The work is somewhat seasonal, with more job opportunities in the summer months.<sup>137</sup>

## **PUSH Blue**

PUSH currently employs a landscape crew to develop and maintain its various properties and to do the stormwater management work described above. PUSH Blue’s team includes two workers from the existing landscape crew, plus four new hires. To recruit the new hires, PUSH held a green jobs fair, did door knocking throughout the entire green development zone, and flyeried businesses, as well as doing traditional job posting.

All employees visit green infrastructure installations around the city at the start of their employment, but most of the training is on the job. Many of the skills gained are basic landscaping/hardscaping skills with some adaptations focused on stormwater capture and infiltration. The crew has learned the use of laser levels, proper excavating techniques, safe excavator operation, safe trucking and dump-trailer operation, gutter installation and repair, fence building, paver installation, light construction, horticulture with a focus on organic techniques and use of native species. The crew staff also receives opportunities for community building and leadership development.



## TRAINING

All PUSH Green and Blue workers receive training certified by the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) to ensure workplace safety.<sup>138</sup> Following OSHA training, workers frequently train by working on PUSH-owned construction projects on the West Side. They then have sufficient experience to work on one of the larger commercial projects for one of PUSH's development partners or contractors, or to transition to a full-time job with a contractor.<sup>139</sup>

PUSH Green is also crafting a partnership with Local 201, Laborers International Union of North America, for a “direct entry training” program, allowing PUSH Green

workers to become apprentices in the union. This would qualify the PUSH workforce for a wider variety of subcontracting opportunities. The goal for this program is that 75% of the employees hired by PUSH Green will be immediately accepted into a union apprenticeship program.<sup>140</sup>



## GREEN JOBS – GREEN NEW YORK

Through the Green Jobs – Green New York (GJGNY) Act, PUSH Green created its “Green Building Retrofit Program.” This program provides free energy audits and affordable upgrades and includes low interest loans which can be repaid directly from the customer’s utility bills. This means that the customer will bear no out of pocket costs, as the savings on utilities will more than pay for the efficiency improvements.<sup>141</sup>

PUSH Green has used the Green Jobs – Green New York program to create a unique jobs initiative. Local energy efficiency contractors have trouble marketing their services to homeowners who fear that the state-supported programs sound “too good to be true,” especially if they have encountered predatory contractors in the past. PUSH uses its community organizing skills and its reputation as a trusted non-profit to market the energy efficiency programs to the public and aggregate demand. In exchange for customer

referrals, PUSH requires the contractors to commit to “high road” practices, such as hiring disadvantaged workers and paying living wages.<sup>142</sup> As a result of this initiative, three contractors have signed high road agreements and have worked with PUSH to complete nearly all of the retrofits.<sup>143</sup>



GJGNY has fallen behind its goals statewide, but it has been highly successful in Western New York. PUSH has completed around 280 home retrofits and 19 small business retrofits in the last two years, meeting implementation goals. Moreover, PUSH has utilized program funds to train 100-125 local residents in green technology, and has helped 30 green workers land permanent employment with local contractors.

## “HIRING HALL” AND CAREER LADDER

In addition to its GJ-GNY work, PUSH Green also acts as a subcontractor to contractors and developers on building projects. In what has become known as a “Community Hiring Hall” model, PUSH has partnered with Savarino Construction to create quality jobs on local construction projects.<sup>144</sup> Essentially, PUSH operates as a source of qualified workers, and, in return, the construction company agrees to abide by certain high road standards, such as paying a living wage.

## CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

Occasionally a developer or other client PUSH Green is working for will not wish to hire certain laborers. This may include ex-offenders or people without a certain amount of experience. However, PUSH Green realizes these are some of the most vulnerable populations who truly need these job opportunities. PUSH Green explains to the client that it is the responsibility of PUSH Green to choose who will provide the labor. Any complaints should address the quality of the job performed, not the personal history of the individuals performing it.<sup>145</sup>

Another challenge is keeping the price of the service affordable enough to find jobs. PUSH Green charges \$22 per hour for its labor services. Less than \$1 of that goes to sustaining the PUSH Green jobs team operations. With PUSH Green’s commitment to providing a “family-raising wage” and other benefits to its employees, the service is unaffordable to many contractors. Contractors will generally pay someone, albeit not as well trained, to perform these labor jobs for between \$10-12 per hour.<sup>146</sup>

PUSH also needs to be careful in maintaining its collaborations with local unions. If PUSH Green undercuts a union bid on a certain contract, that could cause issues when attempting to work with the union on building a curriculum for job training and apprenticeship partnerships.<sup>147</sup>



PUSH has also found it crucial to have someone with legal experience to assist in the preparation and review of contracts with developers, contractors, other clients and employees. Consulting a financial expert or accountant is important to structure insurance benefits, a payment schedule, pay rate, and taxes. Ideally, such services would also be made available to the workers.<sup>148</sup>

Another key recommendation is to be careful in hiring. It is important to remember the hires, particularly the earliest ones, are not only laborers but a sales force. Any expansion or return business is dependent on the quality of work provided and the overall happiness of the contractor with the behavior and skills of the hires.<sup>149</sup>

# PUSH's Advocacy and Community Organizing Efforts

PUSH's community development work in the GDZ is inseparable from its community organizing and advocacy efforts, which have included fighting hikes in gas rates, advocating for clean water, helping to create the Green Jobs – Green New York law, and pushing alternatives to demolition of abandoned housing.

## ADVOCATING FOR COMMUNITY CONTROL OF VACANT PROPERTIES

PUSH began its organizing efforts in 2005-2006 after going door-to-door and speaking with many residents who were concerned about the vacant buildings and lots on the West Side. The first PUSH employees looked into who controlled these properties and discovered that 1,499 vacant buildings and lots in Buffalo were controlled by an obscure state agency. Wall Street investment bankers and lawyers had convinced the state to buy the tax liens on distressed properties from cities such as Buffalo and then to securitize these “assets” and sell them to investors. Because these “assets” actually had negative value, there was no incentive to complete foreclosure on them and no feasible way to maintain or restore them. After being rebuffed repeatedly by the state, PUSH's first direct-action campaign was to have volunteers spray paint a portrait of then-Governor Pataki on the plywood boarding up these abandoned state-owned houses.<sup>150</sup>



Eventually, state officials in Albany took notice, and PUSH entered into negotiations with the state. This resulted in the creation of the *Block by Block Program*, which released over 1,499 vacant properties from state control and created funding streams for rehabilitating homes. PUSH then used this new state funding to perform a \$1.3 million renovation of six formerly vacant homes on 19<sup>th</sup> Street.<sup>151</sup>

## ADDRESSING ENERGY POVERTY

PUSH grounds its organizing work in Just Transition principles. The Just Transition movement views the contemporary development process as rooted in extractive practices that accelerate climate change through carbon emissions and diminish human capital by treating workers as commodities, not long-term assets. PUSH's Just Transition work has included advocating for energy democracy and fighting energy poverty.

Energy poverty is the condition of households that cannot adequately heat their homes. It results from low income, high fuel prices, and poorly insulated, energy inefficient houses. In addition to financial strain, energy poverty causes severe social and health problems for people living in under-heated homes.<sup>152</sup> This problem is pervasive in the GDZ as well as in much of Western New York. Through community



organizing, advocacy, and protest, PUSH catalyzed unprecedented shifts in the distribution of energy conservation funding in Western New York, ensuring that a greater share went toward low-income households for weatherization.<sup>153</sup>

In New York State, the Public Service Commission monitors and regulates utilities. This includes Western New York's National Fuel Gas, the region's gas utility. As part of a larger request to the Commission to increase natural gas rates and to re-design service charges to customers, National Fuel proposed the Conservation Incentive Program (CIP) in 2007. The program was meant to provide funds for energy conservation through a surcharge to customers based on monthly gas usage. The surcharge averaged around \$20 per customer per year, totaling approximately \$10 million per year for the program.<sup>154</sup>

With the help of a corporate and governmental watchdog group, the Public Accountability Initiative, PUSH learned that a disproportionate amount of the CIP funding was going toward wealthy suburbs instead of helping those in Buffalo experiencing energy poverty.<sup>155</sup> While low income residents living in uninsulated, distressed houses had much higher energy bills and thus paid the most into the program, they received the least benefit, because National Fuel spent most of the money on marketing (which was hard to distinguish from advertising for the company) and on rebates for buying energy efficient appliances. These rebates benefitted mostly wealthier customers who could afford the initial costs of new appliances.<sup>156</sup>

PUSH used many different methods of advocacy to influence National Fuel and the Commission. They started by writing a letter to National Fuel outlining people's concerns with National Fuel and protesting when the CEO refused to respond. They then became an interested party in regulatory proceedings by addressing the Commission instead of the uncooperative National Fuel. Soon afterwards, they created the National Fuel Accountability Coalition (NFAC) with twelve other organizations in the region to demonstrate the widespread concern about the CIP's inequity.<sup>157</sup>

Eventually, PUSH and the NFAC forced National Fuel to redistribute the CIP funds, giving more funding towards weatherization for low-income residents and decreasing the amount given towards rebates to homeowners in the wealthier suburbs. After PUSH's efforts, more homes within the GDZ have been weatherized, and the residents' energy bills are significantly lower.<sup>158</sup>

Several years later, when National Fuel had earned more profits than it was legally allowed to, PUSH requested that the Commission reclaim this revenue and use it for low-income home weatherization. Rather than returning all \$7.5 million in excess profits to customers through a one-time credit, which would have been minimal for most, \$1.75 million was allocated to weatherization for low-income households, and \$250,000 was earmarked for emergency furnace replacement for HEAP program recipients.<sup>159</sup>



## GREEN JOBS – GREEN NEW YORK

The Green Jobs – Green New York (GJGNY) Act, which, as described above, provides free energy assessments, training for careers in green industries and installation services, and low-interest financing for energy efficiency upgrades, was passed in 2009.<sup>160</sup>



GJGNY came out of a policy blueprint published by the Center for Working Families in May of 2009. In October, PUSH and the Center for Working Families held a planning conference in Cheektowaga for stakeholders such as contractors and union representatives to attend. PUSH then did extensive organizing and advocacy in support of the campaign for GJGNY. One highlight was an event, pictured below, in which PUSH threw fake dollar bills from an uninsulated home in the West Side to show how low income residents were losing money through energy inefficiency. The proposal became law, and PUSH won a seat on the GJGNY Advisory Council.<sup>161</sup>



# Lessons Learned

When speaking about their work, PUSH staff always stress the importance of transparency and popular education because PUSH aims to build not just housing units and rain gardens, but community capacity.<sup>162</sup> They also note the importance of creativity and of place-specific strategies.

## TRANSPARENCY

It is essential that the community understands what PUSH is doing, how the project is getting done, and why PUSH chose that project. For example, there was a two-year gap between the Community Congress where people expressed an interest in redeveloping School 77 and the time when PUSH obtained the building. The community needs to know that PUSH had been actively planning for School 77 in those two years by holding community planning meetings and applying to obtain the school, as well as looking for funding sources.<sup>163</sup>

PUSH also has to be transparent about its capacity. Some projects that the community would like to see may not be feasible, especially if there is no viable funding source.<sup>164</sup> Another issue is that people may feel that they should be served by PUSH for having been an active participant in its campaigns. For example, people who helped PUSH protest National Fuel's incentives program may feel that because they participated in the protests, they should get their homes weatherized. However, if their homes do not qualify for weatherization, PUSH cannot override regulations just because they were active in the protests. This can cause people to lose their trust in PUSH, which is why it is important for PUSH to make it clear that being an active participant in PUSH's actions does not necessarily result in automatic qualification for a program.

People may also lose their trust in PUSH when PUSH's actions hurt them. People who have had their fences removed by one of PUSH's vacant lot conversion projects may no longer be interested in helping PUSH with its campaigns.<sup>165</sup> West Side residents who are displaced due to rising rents may lose their faith in PUSH's ability to preserve affordability. When PUSH makes a neighborhood cleaner, greener, and more beautiful, property owners may begin to raise rents. PUSH strives to be clear that it cannot completely prevent this; its main strategy is to restore and build enough affordable units in the neighborhood that there will always be some high quality, affordable housing there.<sup>166</sup>

## Popular Education

Popular education uses learning as a way of building community solidarity and capacity. The teachers and students both learn as they critically reflect and discuss issues and topics affecting their community.<sup>167</sup> PUSH uses popular education when it engages with the community in workshops and meetings. By engaging community members through popular education, PUSH not only learns more about community needs but also gives community members an educational background to build community capacity to make informed decisions regarding PUSH's projects. PUSH can use popular education methods to teach people about gentrification in the West Side to help the community make better informed decisions about where PUSH should work while simultaneously learning more about people's lived experiences regarding gentrification in the West Side. Both PUSH and the community become better informed, which helps PUSH to be a more effective community-driven organization.<sup>168</sup>

## THE VALUE OF CREATIVITY AND PLACE SPECIFICITY

When PUSH hears the concerns of the community, there may be multiple possible solutions or no obvious solution. It is up to PUSH to figure out whether the concern can be addressed and how. For example, the issue of vacant lots could be addressed in many ways: there was no one clear solution for every lot. The community had talked about the need for affordable housing and the need for more green space, which PUSH has accommodated in some of the vacant lots it has purchased, but PUSH also noticed that when it rains, the water runs on top of the streets of the West Side before entering the sewer system, causing combined sewer overflows. These combined sewer overflows directly affect many West Side residents, who swim and fish in the bodies of water where the sewage runs. How could PUSH address this issue through vacant lots? Through creative thinking, PUSH employees decided to create rain gardens and parking lots paved in permeable pavement in some of the formerly vacant lots. This also created job opportunities for neighborhood residents to help create this green infrastructure.<sup>169</sup>

PUSH can make these solutions in the West Side because it is a place-specific organization. If PUSH worked throughout Buffalo, its work would have to be broader in order to address more general issues. By restricting its size, PUSH can continue to be effective because it is not biting off more than it can chew. PUSH can maintain its focus on the unique needs of the West Side. It would also be difficult to prevent gentrification if PUSH had to purchase properties throughout the city instead of concentrating on one neighborhood.<sup>170</sup>



## APPENDIX A: THE PUSH MODEL EXPLAINED GRAPHICALLY

*Graphics by Hester Street Collaborative for PUSH Buffalo*





Visioning sessions for School 77



School 77, Normal Ave



Club Utica, 627 West Utica Street



## PROPERTY ACQUISITION + LANDBANKING

1-5 projects per year

THREE main ways that  
PUSH acquires property:

- at the City Auction
- purchase from the city or regular market
- through word of mouth

Once a sale is finalized,  
PUSH will secure the site



If it's a  
**BUILDING**

If it's a  
**VACANT LOT**

WHAT DO WE DO WITH  
THIS PROPERTY?

- Use as a training house for PUSH Green workers
- Sell to another affordable housing developer for a first-time home buyer project
- Match with existing project or idea that needs a site
- Build a community garden or city garden
- Use multiple vacant lots to assemble a larger plot of land for future development
- Hold for future development

**RESULTS:**

- Affordable housing
- Property for future development
- Green space
- Community controlled land

3-4 YEARS





10 Winter Street BEFORE weatherization



PUSH Community Garden



Houses on Normal Ave



456 Massachusetts Ave



10 Winter Street AFTER weatherization



PUSH Community Garden



House on Normal Ave

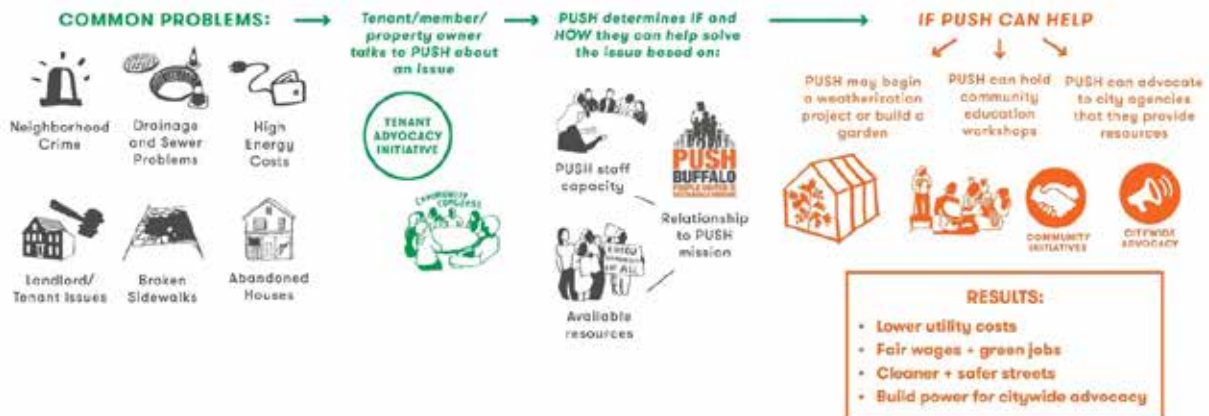


460 Massachusetts Ave



## INFRASTRUCTURE

3-5 issues per year



PUSH Greenhouse



Rain Gardens



Weatherization



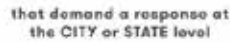
Moss Ave Park and Community Gardens







People see a pattern of issues at the NEIGHBORHOOD level



## TESTS

**POLICY CHANGES**  
that will allow for streetscape improvements, new parks, less zombie properties or zoning changes



**FUNDING**  
that PUSH can  
apply to existing  
programs already  
targeting the issue

[illegible]



# COMMUNITY INITIATIVES

Ongoing

## PUSH Community Initiatives



Your ideas and feedback help PUSH to develop, evaluate, and improve programs



Youth Programming: Grant Street Neighborhood Center



Workforce Development: PUSH Green Job Training



Leadership Development



Weatherization



Arts Programming: PUSH Solar Jam



Community Organizing

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