



Testimony for the Senate Urban Affairs and Housing Committee

Pennsylvania General Assembly

Thursday, June 11th, 2009

Southern Market Center, Lancaster, PA

Good morning. My name is Lisa Riggs, President of the James Street Improvement District, a six year old non-profit community development organization. Thank you for the opportunity to share with the Committee some of the productive work being done in the City of Lancaster related to issues of blight and community revitalization.

The JSID's current mission statement is to build effective partnerships to maintain a clean and safe environment and to promote, plan and advocate for a growing diverse, urban community. As we discuss today issues of blight and later, housing, we are thinking tactically about 'clean and safe' but strategically about our enhanced quality of life.

Today, I will focus briefly on two tactical programs we've deployed. I selected these two examples because they both speak to the need for on-going focused attention on issues of blight, they demonstrate the time, energy and resources needed to have a lasting impact, and they show how all segments of the community – private sector, non-profit and government – play a role.

First, the JSID deploys an 11-member squad of ambassadors, paid personnel that walk and ride bicycles throughout our geographic area of focus, which is the northwest and Downtown portions of Lancaster City. The squad members perform three functions – first, they are neighborhood ambassadors – a friendly face interacting with residents, employees and visitors. Second, they address quality of life concerns, which I'll detail momentarily. Third, they serve as extra "eyes and ears" to support community public safety. Our squad is deployed in two shifts six days a week and one shift on Sunday. Each member patrols a 10-15 block area during his/her shift. Specific to quality of life concerns, our squad is trained to identify various neighborhood conditions, document the concern and then follow up with appropriate municipal or other partners. Just this year – in 2009, our squad has tallied the following statistics:

- 174 reports for trash/unkempt properties/high weeds, generally a consistent pace to prior years
- 52 incidences of graffiti, reflecting a recent spike in activity compared to past years
- 19 reports of broken glass which is low compared to last year, and
- Five abandoned vehicles bringing our total to 193 identified since 2004.

There are several reasons I highlight this activity and these statistics. First, these are the types of problems that exist in many neighborhood that are densely populated, not just low/moderate income ones. The majority of the residential areas our bike squad patrols are by all accounts some of the strongest, most stable ones in the City of Lancaster.

Second, these issues don't go away – they may move from block to block or down the street, but they are fluid. For all of our patrols, combined with the City's efforts and strong residents, the negative activity doesn't stop. Third, the program the JSID offers is a service for which most neighborhoods don't have access. The JSID's bike squad is privately funded as part of our general operating budget. The majority of the JSID's funding sources are corporate and philanthropic grants. Residents and businesses in our geography benefit from fixed patrols, sixteen hours a day, with individuals whose areas of responsibilities are fairly limited. Fourth, the JSID's efforts to identify these issues are only successful if our municipal colleagues are able to respond, and we're fortunate in Lancaster to have such strong partners in the City of Lancaster and Manheim Township. Over the year's we've established a relationship where the municipal crews have confidence in the information we are able to provide so that they can respond effectively.

The second activity we undertake that gets to our charge of 'clean and safe' and enhancing quality of life – really the positive phrase for removing blight – is the job description behind our Program Director. We have one person on our team, Shelby Nauman, whose role over the past four years has been to establish a broad and deep network of personal connections throughout our District. She is a primary point of contact for residents on a broad range of quality of life issues. The practical reality of neighborhood revitalization is that the best champions of it, the best eyes and ears are those that live within the community, or neighborhood or block. Yet, many of these individuals have full time jobs, aren't experts at revitalization strategies and certainly don't have relationships with the myriad of agencies and individuals required to do this sort of work. Our Program Director does. In essence she serves as a liaison between residents and City staff, PPL, UGI, the School District, Boys & Girls Club, the faith based community, major local employers and many others.

Again, the key points I want to impress with this example and our bike squad are the amount of focused, on-going resources required to transition from blight to revitalization/stabilization and the need to be able to work at the micro level, understand the macro and navigate between the two with relative ease.

Incidentally, our Program Director also has served as the Coordinator for the City's North-Central Elm Street area, an initiative that has had a major impact for us. Under the Elm Street program, with the state's considerable support and JSID's community connections, we have leveraged state funds by completing more than 100 façade improvement projects demonstrating a material impact in sales values, funded 13 surveillance cameras, and installed 89 pedestrian lights and 25 street trees. We also have instilled a sense of community in an area that previously had been identified far more by the main streets that run through it instead of the homes there.

In closing, I very much appreciate the Committee's interest in understanding how communities throughout the Commonwealth are addressing issues of blight and strengthening neighborhoods. I hope that the examples I've provided today affirm what you already know about how much energy cities like Lancaster are putting into revitalization efforts and how important the work is for the future of the Commonwealth