

# West River Neighborhood



The West River Neighborhood is a classic turn around story. It's living proof that communities are either improving or declining. Within a 20 year period this neighborhood has done both. In 1991 this was a neighborhood in decline that had all the signs of divestment – boarded up buildings, dilapidated structures, and displacement of families and jobs. It was a place to be avoided or driven through as quickly as possible.

Wind the clock forward to 2009 and it's a very different scene – there's a new community library, new doctor and lawyer offices, a restored historic silk mill, new homes, and the infrastructure continues to undergo a dramatic face lift. There's actually a parking shortfall because so many people want to be there.

What happened in between began with strategic re-investments by the City that primed the economic pump, cleared barriers and demonstrated the investment worthiness of the neighborhood that inspired private investor confidence and capital.

The message of the West River Project is that investment is contagious and sometimes it takes the City to get things started for revitalization to take on a life of its own.

## 2 Decades of Activity

1991 Concept Plan for West River Revitalization Proposed	1992 Master Plan for West River Corridor Developed	1992-93 Roadway Infrastructure Upgrades Constructed	1993 Mixed Use Redevelopment Concept for West River Prepared	1995 Downtown Kent Corp. Formed, land banking began	1998 General Land Use Guide Developed for West River Corridor	1999 Demolition Work Began	2000 to 2009 West River Redevelopment New Construction	2009 to 2012 Fairchild Ave. Bridge New Construction
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# West River Neighborhood Redevelopment

In the 1990's the City began a progressive redevelopment program to revitalize the blighted West River Neighborhood that served as a gateway into downtown Kent. Recognizing the challenge of trying to motivate numerous property owners to commit to a redevelopment initiative on their own, the City initiated a strategy of land banking to assemble ownership of blighted parcels.

For this purpose, the City utilized the Downtown Kent Corporation (DKC) as the real estate broker and financial manager of an innovative credit instrument that represented a collaborative first-time offering of local banking institutions in the amount of a \$1.2 million line of credit. The DKC proceeded to negotiate market rate purchase agreements with the property owners in the corridor on the City's behalf. Approximately 90% of the targeted property owners took advantage of the land sale opportunity.

The City undertook a series of community surveys and information sessions to determine the best and highest use of the land for redevelopment. Using that data, the City sought to re-energize the corridor through new private investment in office space, neighborhood style retail and new housing options.

Nearly two decades after it began the West River project has had much success. Private investment brought new jobs and inspired a remarkable transformation of the corridor. The new construction of the Fairchild Avenue Bridge should serve as an exclamation point anchoring the north end of the project with new hike and bike trail connections, parkland and improved traffic flow.



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## The Importance of the West River Neighborhood

The West River neighborhood holds a prominent position in Kent which is why the City had such a strong interest in spurring revitalization of what had become a distressed corridor.

### Large Land Area

The West River Neighborhood is bounded to the east by the Cuyahoga River, to the west by North Mantua Street, to the south by West Main Street, and to the north by Crain Avenue. This sizable land area includes 83 parcels of property on approximately 21.3 acres, hosting a mix of residential, commercial, office and even light industrial uses.

### Strategic Location

Due to its location at the crossroads of SR 43 and SR 59, the West River Neighborhood is a heavily traveled corridor and serves as an important gateway into Kent. It is located at the edge of the downtown and is considered an extension of the central business district.

### Historic Legacy

The West River Neighborhood was the first center of commerce and civic activity in Kent. The neighborhood includes historic Brady's Leap Park, Franklin Town Hall, the Masonic Temple, and it was the location of the first bridge built across the Cuyahoga River in Kent in 1803.

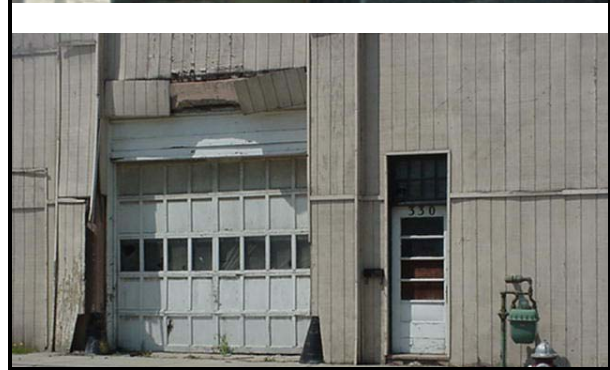
### Role Model

The City's \$3.4 million investment in West River spawned \$18 million in private investment and led to the creation of 140 new jobs. That's a business model that proved its worth and the City is seeking to continue to apply that model to other distressed areas of the City.

# Slum and Blight

In 1993, a professional appraiser surveyed the West River Neighborhood and found it to be in a state of slum and blight. The appraiser noted a large number of dilapidated and deteriorated buildings, inadequate structures, poor lot configurations, unsafe conditions, and graffiti – which led to the finding that the neighborhood blight had become an “economic and social liability.”

*Photos of distressed properties in the corridor in the 1990's.*



## The Turn-Around: Land Banking

The City of Kent saw an opportunity to use City resources as a catalyst for new investment in this important City neighborhood. Leveraging state and federal transportation funding the City began making infrastructure, utility and streetscape improvements. More importantly, the City partnered with the Downtown Kent Corporation to purchase the blighted properties for land banking and redevelopment.

Kent used land banking to assemble small parcels of land that were individually cost prohibitive to redevelop but when combined with other contiguous properties achieved a critical mass that made re-investment viable financially. Acting on the City's behalf, the Downtown Kent Corporation (DKC) spent \$1.2 million dollars on properties located in the West River Neighborhood for land banking.

# The Planning

Over the course of 10 years (1990s) the City worked with citizens and businesses to refine the concept of redevelopment into a workable and marketable plan. The plan was built around those fundamental principles that were identified by the stakeholders and subsequently adopted by City Council as guidelines for redevelopment in the West River corridor. Those principles in turn became the benchmarks for private investment plans. Below is a sampling of the priorities defined in the project development process.

## 1992 Citizen Survey Results

### WEST RIVER NEIGHBORHOOD

#### Summary of Neighborhood Survey

- Repair broken street pavements, curbs and sidewalks
- Reduce traffic speed, noise, through traffic and truck traffic.
- Improve appearance of buildings, parking lots, streets and park areas.
- Discourage nuisance land uses including car repair and industrial activities.
- Encourage preferred business, office, residential and mixed-use redevelopment on Gougler Street.
- Encourage renovation of existing single family homes on Mantua Street and Park Avenue.
- Encourage development of neighborhood park facilities including playground, streetscape and river edge improvements.
- Preserve historic buildings and places.
- Establish design standards for new development

## Original Project Objectives

**Land Use Improvements** – encourage compatible uses for central business district in a major university city; remove substandard blighted and deteriorated properties; provide neighborhood commercial and residential uses; eliminate small parcels and aggregate sufficient acreage to permit modern redevelopment.

**Environmental Objectives** – develop an attractive and improved environment; remove poorly maintained, nuisance properties; redevelop to prevent blight from recurring; develop attractive landscape and lighting; improve access to the Riveredge Park.

**Public Improvements** – continue to upgrade sidewalks, curbs, gutter and street surface from Riveredge Park to Crain Avenue.

**Circulation Objectives** – improve the safety and efficiency of people, goods and services for all modes of circulation, e.g., pedestrian, biking, auto and trucks.

**Economic Objectives** – stimulate and facilitate redevelopment with new businesses facilities; remove blight to encourage private reinvestment; create new jobs and dwelling units.

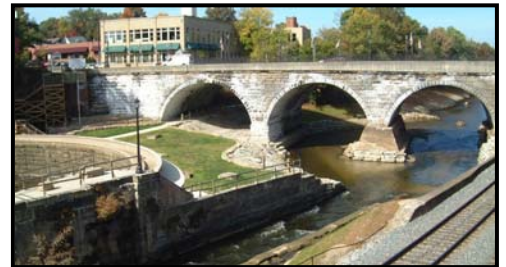
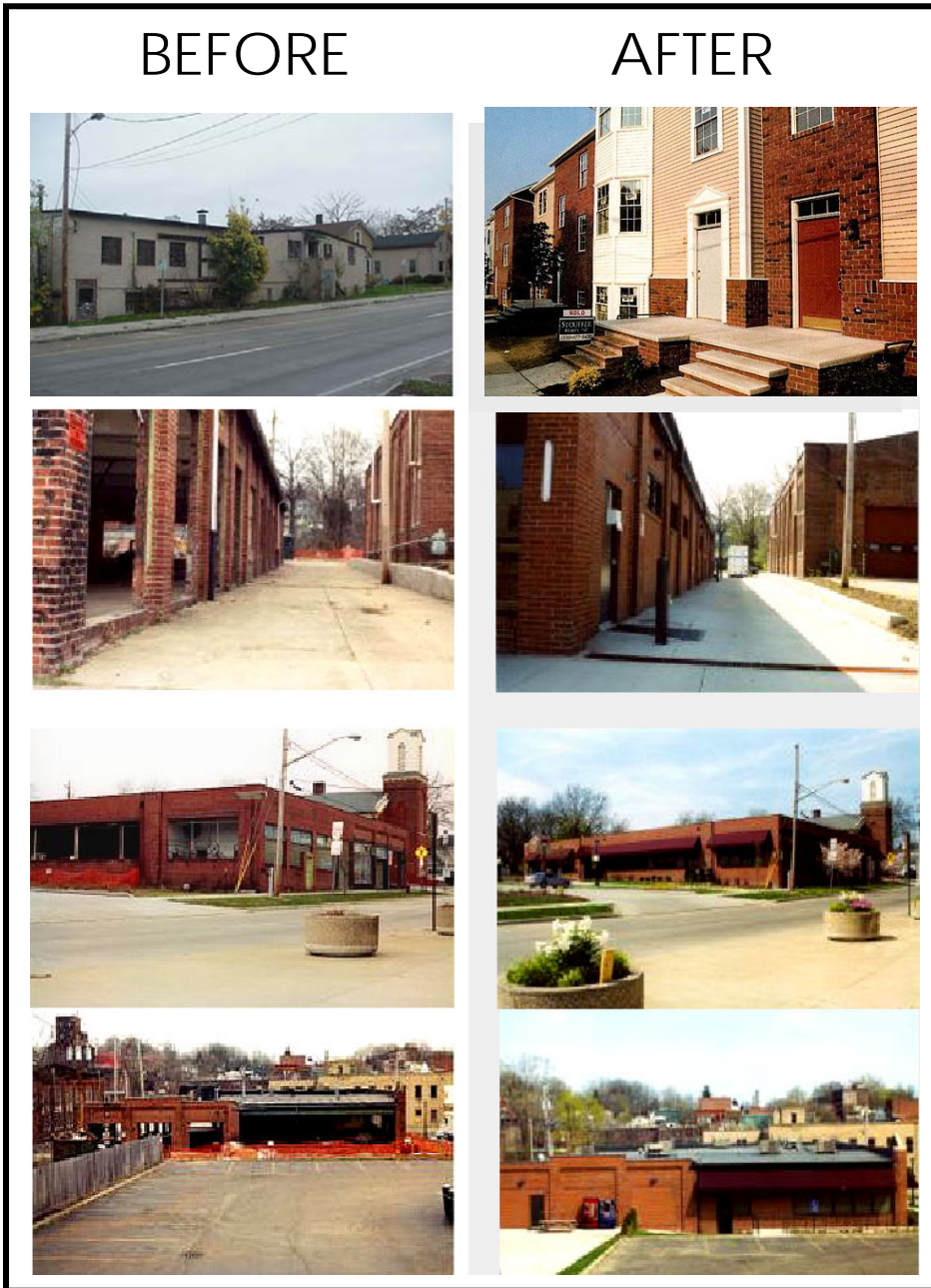
The planning concepts evolved into schematics and renderings that illustrated how the development objectives should be integrated in a comprehensive redevelopment strategy that featured a mix of new office, neighborhood retail and residential offerings. Below is an example of one of the original redevelopment schematics. Note the emphasis on use of the river as both a passive and active amenity, including kayaking and canoeing.



# The Results

Through the redevelopment opportunities created by the land banking initiative, ten new businesses opened in the corridor – including high end doctor's offices – and approximately 140 new jobs have been added to the corridor that bring in \$75,000 a year to our tax base. That's \$750,000 in 10 years.

According to the records held at the Portage County Auditor's Office, property values of the majority of the homes in the West River Neighborhood have doubled since improvements were made in the area. The revitalization gains made in the West River Neighborhood spread to include the dam restoration; the old silk mill was renovated into loft apartments and offices; and the library was expanded. The County's records also show property value increases on homes adjacent to the West River Neighborhood exceeded the average rate of property value growth in Kent suggesting the influence of the West River revitalization.



Other than the 2009 Phoenix project in downtown Kent, the West River corridor had more private investment than any other area of the City in the last 20 years.

# Public Investment

In terms of total public investment, including the City's share of the infrastructure upgrades and any other capital related cost, it turns out that over a twelve year period (1993 to 2005) the City invested \$3.4 million -- which went into everything from roads to land purchases and blighted building demolition. That \$3.4 million public investment was in turn leveraged into nearly \$18 million in additional state, federal and private investments in the neighborhood.

In other words, for every City dollar invested the project, the community received \$6 in return. If you add-in the City's success in 2009 obtaining additional state and federal dollars for the Fairchild bridge project, the City's total financial contribution rises to approximately \$7.5 million and the external revenues climb to \$43 million.

The financial figures fail to quantify the considerable improvement in how the neighborhood looks. Blighted, vacant properties have been replaced by new and restored buildings. Prior to the West River project 90% of the properties were in violation of city maintenance codes -- today, code violations are less than 5%.

It's not easy to put a dollar value on aesthetic improvements but given the fact that some 20,000 vehicles travel through this corridor everyday -- with drivers and riders that could be tomorrow's new Kent businesses or homeowners -- the neighborhood is now leaving a much more positive impression of the City and hopefully that translates into more people wanting to be a part of Kent's new economy.

\$7.5 million is a lot of money but the City leaders in 1993 thought Kent was worth it and since then so have a lot of private investors who followed the City's lead and invested significant dollars to transform the neighborhood. Most people are comfortable taking out a 30 year mortgage to buy a house and the City applied that same logic to making a community investment.

Just like personal investments, people are likely to have different expectations for rates of return and yields over time but whether we expect public investments to pay for themselves in year 1, year 30 or year 50, it's important to keep in mind that all investments have some level of risk and there are few guarantees out there. Even with detailed forecasts and analyses economic development is still subject to the same uncertainties as any investment.

That's why it's called economic development and not economic inheritance. Development implies taking some action, getting in the game, knowing that things might not turn out as hoped but also knowing that the risk of sitting and waiting for an economic windfall to come along is likely greater than making strategic investments that could shape the future.

West River was a major investment project for the City but all indications and measures suggest that it was one of the most successful development projects that the City has ever undertaken.