

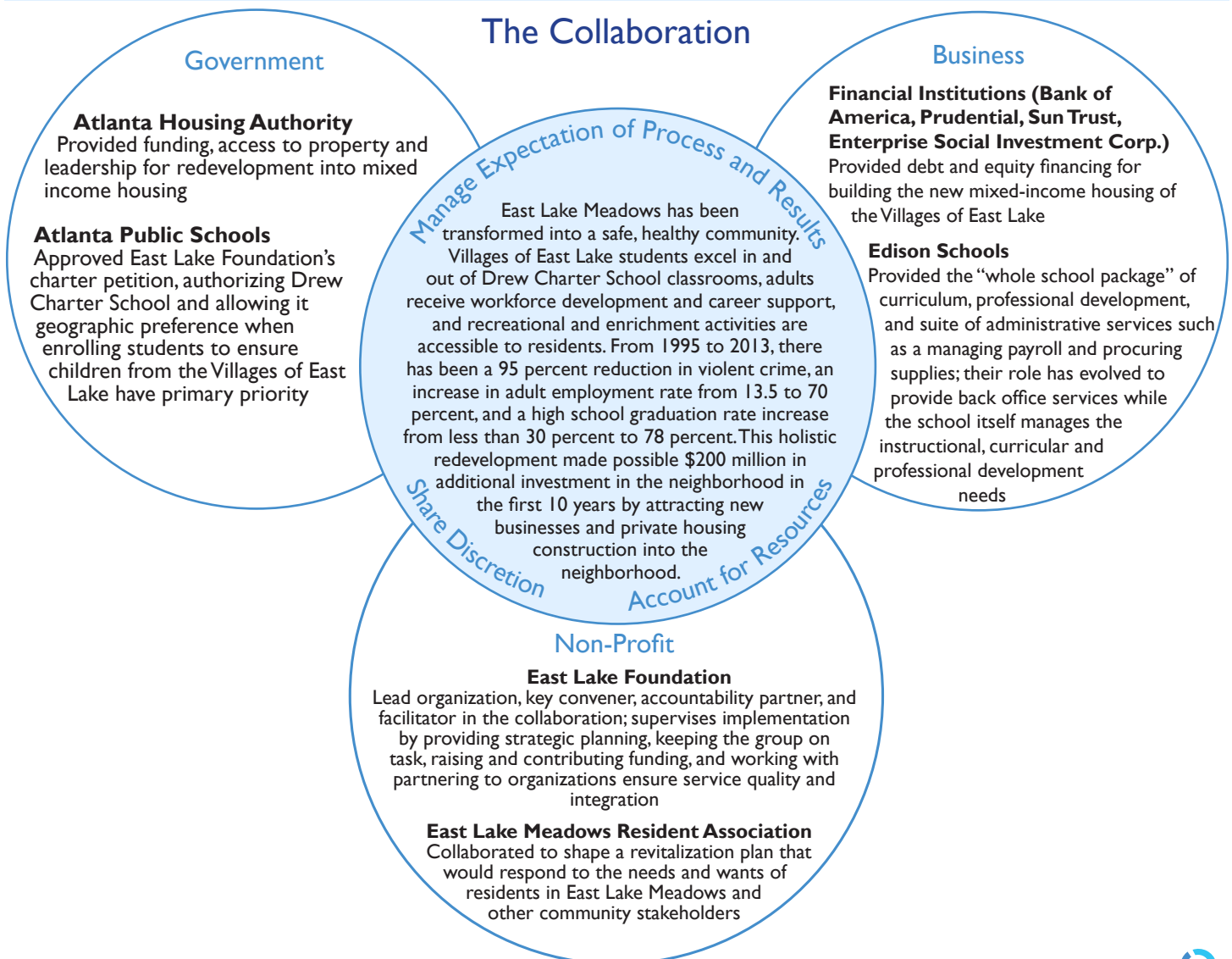


Building a Neighborhood of Economic Opportunity in Atlanta

Issue: Community Revitalization | Location: Georgia, United States

The Story

In 1995, in the East Lake Meadows public housing complex located four miles from downtown Atlanta, only four percent of residents earned incomes above the poverty line. The unemployment rate was 86.5 percent, and the neighborhood was home to a multi-million dollar drug trade with a crime rate 18 times higher than the national average. Less than 10 percent of children attending the neighborhood elementary school met basic proficiency standards in math by fifth grade. In 1993, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development awarded the Atlanta Housing Authority (AHA) a \$35 million grant to renovate the crumbling housing stock of East Lake Meadows. Renee Glover, who had recently joined AHA as President, realized that merely renovating housing would not create a safer, more prosperous community. Concurrently, Tom Cousins, Founder of Cousins Properties, Inc., formed the East Lake Foundation to support and lead an integrated and holistic community approach which would provide mixed income housing, cradle-to-college education, and community wellness resources through public and private partnerships. Along with Carol Naughton, a real estate attorney for AHA, and Greg Giornelli, the Executive Director of the East Lake Foundation, and neighborhood residents, Tom and Renee catalyzed a collaborative effort to transform East Lake Meadows. This model and its success led to the development of Purpose Built Communities – a national network that redevelops distressed communities in cities throughout the United States.



The Leadership

Renee had left her position as a finance lawyer to become Executive Director of AHA, pursuing her vision of transforming the troubled AHA into a resource for low-income families. In 1995, she presented Carol with an opportunity to play a role in realizing her vision. After ten years of brokering major deals at a prestigious law firm as a commercial real estate lawyer, Carol felt that “trying to solve a big social problem was the kind of thing [she] went to law school to do” and accepted a position as AHA’s lawyer.

Tom established the East Lake Foundation, shifting his philanthropic investments to target the East Lake community; he named Greg Giornelli its founding Executive Director. Greg would join Carol in leading the East Lake collaborative on the ground, where they met Eva Davis, President of the East Lake Meadows Resident Association, an advocate for the families of East Lake. Together, Tom, Greg, Renee, Carol, and Eva led the building of a cross-sector collaboration that laid the foundation for building a new East Lake.



Balanced Motivations

Carol was contemplating partnership at a law firm when Renee presented her with the opportunity to join the legal team at AHA. Carol wanted to use her legal expertise to meet the challenge of fixing a troubled agency, but her fundamental drive came from wanting to create a resource for low-income families, the same desire that led Renee to leave her practice as a private lawyer to join AHA. Carol later left her role in the AHA in 2001 to join East Lake Foundation in order to deepen the impact she could have on the East Lake Village project, as well as to achieve broad impact by replicating the success of the East Lake model in other communities.



Transferable Skills

Carol became a sharp negotiator by brokering deals as a private practice lawyer. Her negotiation skills allow her the ability to read each party’s motives and to differentiate needs from wants, which was critical to building consensus among AHA, East Lake Foundation, and community residents. At the law firm, Carol also worked to develop partnerships that were balanced and mutually beneficial, a skill which she identifies as necessary for sustainability, especially for long-term partnerships such as the Villages of East Lake.



Intellectual Thread

Tom, Greg, Renee, and Carol each applied the expertise gained in the private sector to make the East Lake collaborative a success. As one of Atlanta’s foremost real estate developers, having developed the city’s emblematic skyscraper and numerous downtown buildings, Tom possessed the ability to identify properties with the potential to leverage further investment. For example, through his family foundation, he purchased the run down golf course across the street from East Lake Meadows. The revenue from the refurbished golf course became a source of financing for the development of the entire East Lake campus, and continues to sustain costs for community services. Carol was an expert in real estate law, including regulations governing zoning and use of private and public land. By bringing this knowledge to the collaboration, the AHA and East Lake Foundation were able to buy, sell, and swap land in order to create the unique East Lake Village campus. This allowed the campus to include the construction of the new YMCA, school buildings, public golf course, and affordable and market-rate housing, while at the same time eliminating decrepit and abandoned infrastructure and empty lots.



Integrated Networks

Tom’s experience and reputation as a smart businessman in Atlanta for 50 years allowed him to call upon his partners to support the East Lake project by rallying representatives from private sector companies, including Bank of America, SunTrust Bank, Coca-Cola, and Atlantic Realty, to contribute their expertise and resources by joining the East Lake Foundation Board of Directors.

The Toolkit



Establish a governance structure

Revitalization efforts began in 1995 with a Planning Committee comprised of a core group from the Atlanta Housing Authority (AHA), East Lake Foundation, and community residents, with participation by representatives from the broader neighborhood and other organizations, such as Atlanta Public Schools. The Planning Committee and its subcommittees met weekly to create a plan for neighborhood revitalization that reflected the needs and wants of all partners, ensuring inclusion and input from all stakeholders. The community vision, plans, and decisions put in place by the Planning Committee shaped the project's implementation and continuing evolution.



Share discretion

All partners were involved in and influenced major decisions during the project's planning and launch, such as the interview process for selecting the education management company to open Charles Drew Charter School. Although the collaboration member with fiduciary responsibility executed decisions, such as the charter school board did in selecting Edison Schools or the AHA did in initiating a demolition plan, decisions were made after consensus had been reached among the group. This ensured each partner felt responsibility for and ownership of outcomes. Some major decisions, such as the one to demolish and rebuild housing instead of renovating the existing, were put to a community vote to make sure the decision reflected the desired direction of the entire community.



Establish transparency of viewpoints

The first Planning Committee meetings were contentious, but partners openly shared their initial distrust of each other's intentions. Partners built trust and understanding of mutual interests by openly sharing their concerns, needs, and goals week after week, turning a contentious forum into a constructive one. Carol explained that the regular meetings allowed stakeholders to spend "a lot of time together and solve a lot of problems together... even when we disagreed on something, there was always something else that we were working to solve."



Account for resources

As the collaboration's vision grew more ambitious and the plan more complex, so did the resource needs for this holistic approach that included housing demolition and education reform. It became clear that the federal housing renovation grant would not be sufficient, and the Planning Committee began exploring what institutional partners would be needed in order to meet the financial, regulatory, planning, and expertise needs of the project. For example, when demand for early care and education services that prepared children to enter Drew Charter School ready to learn outgrew the capacity of the Sheltering Arms Early Learning Center, the East Lake YMCA was recruited to house an early learning center. Six higher education partners have also been brought in to contribute to the academic success of students in the community by providing Drew teachers with professional development in language, pedagogy, and STEAM, as well as providing students well-rounded enrichment programs in robotics, music, student government, peer mentoring, and support for the transition into high school. Wellness resources also play a role in the East Lake blueprint. In order to ensure ample opportunities for enrichment activities, the Southeastern Horticultural Society manages the community learning garden and urban farm, providing children and youth hands-on learning in green and horticultural skills and providing the community access to organic produce.



Manage expectations of process and results

When they began to plan the revitalization of East Lake, none of the partners fully appreciated that they were embarking on a long-term project. Partners' aspirations grew as they witnessed progress toward improved conditions and expanded opportunities in the community. Sustaining momentum was most challenging during the first years, but partners recognized progress and the importance of their vision through small celebrations, such as the ceremonial signing of the Memorandum of Agreement that captured the terms of the revitalization plan. Nearly 200 community members and all collaboration partners signed a copy of the Agreement. Sustained by the changes in the community and its members, East Lake continues to seek out new strategies and partners to support community well-being, with plans to incorporate physical health programs.



Identify a manager

As the revitalization process evolved, the importance of an organization focused on bringing in new partners and resources and in coordinating, integrating, and overseeing the many efforts in education, housing construction, and wellness programs became apparent. Having been a key participant in the collaboration's planning and project launch, coupled with the resource capacity to focus on the Villages of East Lake, the East Lake Foundation naturally took on these responsibilities, serving as the "community quarterback". The Foundation keeps the collaboration on track, provides strategic planning, and sustains progress.

The Intersector Result

Nineteen years after the East Lake collaboration began creating a revitalization plan, the community is now thriving. Children receive a high quality cradle-to-college education in the local early childhood centers (beginning as young as six-weeks old) and in the school, almost all adults are employed or in job training programs, and East Lake Villages is an integrated, mixed-income community in which people of diverse backgrounds live in and share the various recreational activities offered through places like the YMCA, the community learning garden, and the public golf course. The experience of the Villages of East Lake has informed a community revitalization model that in the process of being replicated in seven cities across the United States. Purpose Built Communities, a non-profit organization founded to share the knowledge and practices in “the East Lake formula,” helps local leaders to develop mixed-income housing, education, and community wellness infrastructure and programs, to other communities. Carol now works as Senior Vice President of Purpose Built Communities.

The East Lake Foundation continues to incorporate new strategies to realize the vision and plan developed by the collaboration. In May (2014), the Foundation launched a research-based pilot program to connect residents to health resources by establishing a medical home at the neighborhood clinics, building awareness and health practice to address manageable and preventable diseases and increasing access to the state health insurance program. Education remains a core focus on their strategy, with plans to extend the high quality education offering into high school. Achievements of the East Lake Meadows revitalization include:

- Violent crime has been reduced by 95 percent.
- 98 percent of Drew Charter School students meet or exceed standards in reading and math.
- 70 percent of low-income adults are employed, up from 13.5 percent in 1995.
- Income for residents in East Lake Meadows (was all public housing) has increase from \$4,500 annually to more than \$17,000 for families living in affordable units in the Villages of East Lake.

“Cross-sector collaboration isn’t merely an option but a necessity to create neighborhoods where everyone can thrive. The necessary skill sets, funding streams, and leadership aren’t found only in one sector, but live in all sectors; collaborations allows for better coordination, more efficient use of resources, and greater impact. The revitalization of East Lake in Atlanta is a strong example of the power of cross-sector collaboration. Purpose Built Communities is helping leaders around the country use the model developed in East Lake to build healthy, sustainable neighborhoods with pathways to prosperity for the lowest income families.”

— Carol Naughton, Senior Vice President, Purpose Built Communities