One Region Forward

Housing and Neighborhoods Working Team

Working Team Meeting #6
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Welcome, Introductions and Review

- Clarke: It looks like we’re moving along logically while we’re trying to make progress on a number of things. We want to wrap these things up within this and the next 2 meetings.

Working Team Process and Timeline

- Armstrong: The next working group meeting in February will be a combined meeting of all of the working groups. Our working group meeting in March will be our last.

- Hovey: In February we want to discuss the connections across working teams, talk about the work that each team is doing, and get feedback on the work of the teams from other teams. There are a lot of connections between the teams. We also want to have an across the board discussion about the structure and process of implementation-what will it look like? The March meeting will consist of a review of the draft plan for the public to look at and comment on.

Fair Housing Equity Assessment (FHEA) Update

- Armstrong: The FHEA relates a lot to the topics we’ve been talking about. The reason why HUD wants us to complete the FHEA is so we consider the historical segregated context of many of our communities when making decisions. In other words, we need to answer how we address segregation and how this is reflected in our regional plan? What we are producing is similar to the new rules that HUD is proposing regarding regional analysis of equity for future program and grant recipients, thus, we are basically testing out some of the ideas they have for future initiatives.
We have a meeting this Friday to go over the FHEA. We’re going to go over a draft document before we put out another draft for public comment.

What we have seen so far is that in the Cities of Buffalo and Niagara Falls, there are clearly concentrations of poverty, especially with respect to race. We’ve been trying to discuss why certain concentrated areas are the way they are. We’ve also seen that there are disparities in access to opportunities (e.g. food, schools, jobs, and housing) between neighborhoods that might be based on race.

The Housing Stability Index is determined by 5 different factors. For the maps in the presentation, the darker the gradient, the more desirable the conditions.

Overcrowding doesn’t seem to be an issue in our region. In contrast, there are high clusters of vacancies in cities, first ring suburbs, and rural communities.

The housing stability score is very high in second ring suburbs, but it decreases as you get closer to the city. This scoring of this grouping may be the most problematic of all of our indices because of the disconnect between our housing market and national data sources like the Home Mortgage Disclosure Act (HMDA).

Next meeting we’ll make recommendations about how to improve access in neighborhoods. Other next steps include finishing assembling data on opportunity areas and public investment, developing policy and practice recommendations, and drafting a plan.

**Review Key Points from Strategy Theme Discussions**

- **Armstrong:** For the b) statement under the second strategy theme, “Developing and deploying housing models to accommodate people with special needs (and an aging population) by coordinating design, neighborhood context, supportive services, and other programming” a new addition to it is the phrase “(and an aging population)”. Thoughts on this?

- **Mori:** I think we should add the word “including” into this statement so that it reads “Developing and deploying housing models to accommodate people, including those with special needs and the aging population, by coordinating design, neighborhood context, supportive services, and other programming”. That way we’re not just limiting our attention to people with special needs or senior citizens. *(Everyone else agreed to this change)*

- **Clarke:** Is “recruiting” the right word in the c) statement “Identifying and recruiting demographic groups that might provide impetus for focused neighborhood revitalization”? Perhaps we should replace this word with “attracting”. *(Everyone else agreed to this change)*
• Armstrong: The a) statement under the fourth strategy theme, “Reconsidering the scope and scale of the housing support and delivery system, to increase region wide capacity while remaining responsive to community context”, is an overall recommendation that many others can fall under.

**Determine Action Steps, Project Leads and Participants:**

• Armstrong: We have had lots of conversations about each of these four themes, and the actions listed under each of these themes are the overarching pieces of feedback.

For the first strategy theme (Provide Resources for Informed Decision Making), there was a strong consensus that we want a local partner involved in this. There was also wide agreement that we want the system to have depth and breadth. In other words, we want it to be regional in scope, but we want it to have specifics about any neighborhood or parcel. Another critical component we identified is that the toolkit can’t just sit online if we expect people to use it. We have to offer technical assistance in order to make it more appealing and useful to our audience.

• Hovey: Do we want to have a relationship between this data system and the others that the other working teams are proposing? Or should these data systems be separate?

• Armstrong: How big can the system be? Who will run it? Do we have the internal capacity to run it or will we have to find someone from the outside to do this?

• Clarke: I think that it makes sense to consolidate the various systems.

• Hovey: This issue is going to come up again as we get closer to finalizing the plan.

• Greenberg: I feel like a lot of people already know how to obtain property information from existing sources. For example, there is the New York State GIS database, Google Maps, and a database compiled by the National Association of Realtors. Furthermore, many of these systems are easy to use. So why do we need to create another database? We should just be trying to get people to use the sources that are already out there.

• Armstrong: So you’re saying instead of figuring out how to get data, we should be figuring out how to bring it to people?

• Hovey: I think we are starting to have conversations that we’ve already had. We need to start focusing on the details-who, what, where, when, and how.

• Armstrong: So for the rest of the meeting, we’re going to through all of the actions by themes. So starting with theme A, which local organization should take on these actions? The UB Regional Institute (UBRI) has been suggested. Does anyone have any other recommendations?
Simeon: The UBRI is already well-known so that’s a plus of having it take on these responsibilities. But organizations like the PPG (Partnership for the Public Good) or Open Buffalo would also be good.

Hovey: Open Buffalo has the money but not the staff to take on these actions.

Ollinick: Maybe we should first talk about how malleable the system is. That will determine who should create and maintain it. Also, there’s a certain level of public/private collaboration that should be considered. In addition, there’s a causal and a formal use for data. So we want to answer who formalizes the data.

Armstrong: So far the suggestions are UBRI and Open Buffalo. Now we need one or both of these groups committing to doing these systems.

Clarke: I don’t think that Open Buffalo could handle it. I think UBRI is in the best position to take this on.

Borowiak: I think that UBRI should do these actions too, although I can’t envision feeling obliged to submit data to the UBRI for the system, the same way that I feel obligated to submit data to the state’s public service commission.

Armstrong: One thing that I learned from Bart Roberts is that the best way to get data from the field is to get it from people that are already gathering it by getting their permission to use their data, and not asking them to change how they collect their data or work in general.

Ollinick: Maybe we should have a board that decides how data is filtered, since this is a large task. We also need to spread the word about the system and have buy in for it, and a board could perform both of these functions. Also, individual towns may want data. In addition, there should be other uses for this data. We should just provide the data and then people will use it how they want, in ways that we probably could not imagine.

Armstrong: It seems that there is a preference for the UBRI to do this. Where do the resources to do these actions come from though? Does UBRI use their own resources or do they get help from others?

Ollinick: We need an advisory group of data professionals and others to identify the system’s needs and how to get funding for it.

Armstrong: So the UBRI and an advisory board of data professionals should work together to make the data system?

Ollinick: Yes.
Mori: On that board there should be a technical person.

Clarke: There’s no way that just one organization can create and maintain the system.

Ollinick: It seems like we’re trying to form a huge database that all the working teams contribute to. Is that correct?

Hovey: I think it is good to have an advisory board to deal with technical issues. But the big issue that this conversation relates to is how to implement a regional plan without a regional planning entity? There is inevitably going to have to be a home for One Region Forward, whether it is a regional planning entity or not. And whatever that home is, it will be able to take on the data responsibility.

The other issue though is that none of the entities suggested have flows of money to do this sort of work, so having the capacity and know-how to do this work is one thing, but having the money to do it is another. So we have to depend on people who see the data as being worth money. The UBRI and CGR (Center for Governmental Research) have capacity, but not money.

Simeon: A fee for service option could be good in order to increase the funding for this. We could set it up so that basic information would be free but if you want more detailed information you have to pay money.

Greenberg: But again, using data systems like the one we are proposing are not difficult. Anyone can learn how to put in commands. So the technical assistance component wouldn’t have to be that strong.

Armstrong: The PPG has come up. Any thoughts on that? Also, the Citizen Planning School is another potential spot for training users.

Hovey: We need to differentiate programs though.

Armstrong: There would be training (how you interface with the system) and also technical assistance (how you use the data).

Ollinick: So step one should be gather data and make it available, and step two should be organize, present, and interpret the data.

Armstrong: Moving onto the second theme (Anticipate, Accommodate and Embrace Demographic Shifts), are there any suggestions for an advocacy and education lead?
• Borowiak: Just to clarify-we don’t need to send out RFPs? We can just choose the lead ourselves and HUD is okay with that?

• Armstrong: Yes because we don’t have money to offer potential entities. It’s not a contract for services, this is really about trying to get someone to take the lead to make these initiatives happen.

• Simeon: I recommend a Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB) for communities.

• Armstrong: Is this lead something that we can tap or is it something that needs to be created?

• Simeon: Clarke, can your organization do this or part of it? We need a group that has credibility, and especially if the group is not a funder. Currently funders are the only credible actors. Your organization has credibility.

• Ollinick: I agree that you need a CVB. I also think that you need a 501C-4 that can do that kind of work. I don’t think that this entity should provide funding; it should just be an advocacy organization.

• Armstrong: So some ideas have been an existing policy, project watchdog, or educational entity, or a completely new organization.

Moving on, to the next identified need, is there any entity that wants to do market analysis right now? Or should it be done by the same organization that does advocacy?

• Ollinick: Step one is to create something to be held accountable.

• Greenberg: Isn’t the UBRI capable of advocacy and market analysis? We’re never going to get Niagara and Erie County to get together to form a regional planning board. So UBRI has to take on these tasks. And if people don’t want to follow the guidelines, then that’s how it is and we just have to accept that. I think that the UBRI should put together the database and make it accessible to people so that they can do useful research. I think that they should also provide policy recommendations.

• Mori: The UBRI has the capacity to do these tasks but it is under UB. So maybe we should create something completely separate so that it is not beholden to anything, like the UBRI might be to UB’s research agenda.

• Clarke: Other case studies have placed these planning entities under schools because they’re unbiased (e.g. University of Pennsylvania, Kent State).

• Borowiak: I could see the UBRI being the “regional coordinator for zoning, planning regulations, and investment decisions.”
Mori: Instead of having a regional coordinator, doesn’t the Framework for Regional Growth address this?

Ollinick: Someone has to collect data to make arguments. Whoever is doing advocacy, market analysis, and technical assistance, should also be the regional coordinator.

Borowiak: I could see technical assistance and regional coordination working together under the Framework. If these functions have already been developed in communities can reach out to them and help them further develop it.

Hovey: I think that technical assistance and regional coordination should be done by the same entity. And these do not necessarily have to be done by the regional planning entity/home of One Region Forward, because these are done at the neighborhood and municipal levels.

Armstrong: Let’s move onto the third theme (Target Neighborhoods Based on Their Strategic Assets).

Scibilia: From the neighborhood perspective, I would say that the bottom-up approach needs to be considered. Community members are already organizing. Their impression of their community and where it should go may not interface with our data or our expectations. So I think that neighborhoods and community leaders should be involved early on in the planning process and the knowledge gathering, at some level. We should empower them with the knowledge that we have. Their assessment isn’t necessarily realistic if they don’t have the data. So that’s a missing piece that needs to be incorporated soon, which will be hard. We need to help them, not squelch them or try to change their minds.

Hovey: I think that the adjustment process between objective data and place-based knowledge is hard, but both types of data have to be used.

Armstrong: Bottom-up is crucial. Residents need to be empowered by data and best practices. But who are the residents going to trust?

Hovey: This relates to theme 4.

Greenberg: A lot of data is already available. Residents can already get it.

Armstrong: But residents don’t know how raw data for one area may relate to how another community may have approached a similar situation. Data interpretation and best practice knowledge are also important.

Greenberg: The database should contain case studies.
Armstrong: But databases don’t contain these. And we can’t assume that communities can figure out all of this stuff on their own when there are skills and knowledge differentials between neighborhoods. Leaving communities to fend for themselves inherently disadvantages traditionally marginalized neighborhoods.

Scibilia: We cannot rely completely on community to plan for themselves, or to acquire the skills of planners. I’m just saying that data can empower residents to accept scenarios that they like and don’t like, but are more realistic.

**Administrative Review & Next Steps:**

Armstrong: We didn’t get to go through everything, so we will have to rework the next meeting’s agenda. The next meeting or the working groups, which will be joint meeting of all working groups, is probably going to be February 25th, although that is not confirmed yet. The meeting will be during the last week of February, though. After that, we’ll hash out the rest of this stuff in our last meeting. Finally, you’ll get these meeting notes via email shortly.