

CARVER HILLS NEIGHBORHOOD PROJECT

Atlanta, Georgia

Carver Hills is a low-income, African-American subdivision of single-dwelling units enveloped by several government and subsidized apartment complexes in the Northwest, inner-city section of Atlanta. The residents have for the most part maintained their homes in good condition with attractive, though simple yards.

In 1964, residents formed the Carver Hills Civic League. In 1989, the community revitalized itself in the face of mounting environmental and social injustices resulting from the neighboring, city-owned Gun Club Landfill. The landfill's blowing trash and lumbering trucks were a constant presence in the community, creating unsanitary conditions and pollution that is thought to have contributed to an increase in health problems in the community. Discouraged by seemingly insurmountable challenges, apathy settled in among the Carver Hills residents. In response to this, and with hopes of mobilizing community residents as well as improving poor environmental conditions, the Carver Hills Neighborhood Association, Inc. (CHNA) emerged.

The overarching goals of the Carver Hills Neighborhood Association are to:

- empower community residents;
- increase the awareness of the city government and its citizens regarding problems of health and environment as they impact on the community;
- train the citizens of the community in the process of critical thinking and analysis so they are able to identify problems and the means to solve them;
- create new and stronger organizations within the neighborhood as well as strengthen existing ones so that the goals of CHNA can be more effectively realized and a stronger interlinking bond can be established among the people;
- expand awareness concerning the environment and plan action programs to bring about a cleaner, greener, and healthier community;
- be alert to the manner in which any of the issues confronted can be solved not only through community involvement but also by entrepreneurial solutions within the community.

To achieve these goals, the Carver Hills Neighborhood Association and the Georgia Environmental Organization, Inc. (GEO), a non-profit, statewide organization headquartered in Atlanta, established a partnership in Summer 1992. GEO provided strategizing assistance to the community, and was able to make available its local, state, and national contacts, which provided additional support to the community. One of those, the Highlander Educational Research Center in Tennessee, helped increase national awareness of the Gun Club Landfill problems by publicizing the story. The publicity bolstered the interest of the Carver Hills residents, letting them know that outside support did exist. GEO and Highlander have also provided leadership training to neighborhood residents throughout the process to close the landfill and turn the resident's energies to improving their community.

Closing the landfill

The Gun Club Landfill lies on the opposite side of Procter Creek from the Carver Hills neighborhood. Dumping first began in 1965, and in 1974 it became a licensed municipal landfill. It is situated on 179 acres, of which 106 acres were licensed for dumping. It received up to 890 tons of trash a day to reach a height of 23 stories of layered household solid waste (garbage, trash, leaves, paper, and yard waste) and soil. The Department of Public Works resisted closing the Gun Club Landfill because it served as one of Atlanta's largest receptacles of garbage. The ultimate closure would mean finding new means of dealing with vast amounts of garbage.

Despite the resistance of the Dept. of Public Works, the Carver Hills Neighborhood Association was able to catalyze a strong campaign for the closing of the landfill through monthly neighborhood meetings, flyers, door-to-door educational canvassing and neighborhood events. Residents of Carver Hills and the nearby Gun Club community (residing on the other side of the landfill) attended City Council committee meetings and testified about the poor environmental and economic conditions of the community due to the landfill's existence. After several unsuccessful attempts to close the landfill, the City Council passed an ordinance to do so in December 1992.

Creating a community vision

Once the landfill was closed, the CHNA led residents to search for ways that the resources of the community—both natural and human—could be improved to make the area

a more livable one. Carver Hills is a neighborhood of approximately 2,000 people. The Carver Hills Neighborhood Association meets the first Monday evening of each month with between 30-50 residents attending at any one time. All members of the neighborhood have both voice and vote. Activities for the whole neighborhood and for the various age-groups occur regularly.

The CHNA set out to find a means of improving Carver Hills. The abandoned Finch Elementary School site offered the ideal location for community life and activities that could also enrich the ecology of the area. The property, comprising 13 1/2 acres of land, had lain fallow ever since the school was closed and torn down. It has four naturally tiered levels, the lowest of which is a wilderness area that borders Procter Creek. The Gun Club landfill is on the creek's opposite bank.

Carver Hills purchased the 13 1/2 acres of land for \$6,000: \$1,500 in earnest money was provided to the community to secure the property by the Georgia Environmental Organization; the remainder was raised through a combination of community donations, special event fund-raisers such as "Fish Fries" and money from city and foundation grants.

With the acquired land, Carver Hills residents plan to transform the entire neighborhood into a "Natural Space/Urban Forest Community" that will include:

A Community Center:

- Within the parameters of the budget, the neighborhood center will be designed with community needs and ideas in mind and will be built with donated environmentally friendly materials and equipment;

Natural Areas:

- Two wilderness areas with a total of four and a half acres and a connecting trail;
- The park will be ringed by trees, about one third of which are already standing and two-thirds of which will be planted. Trees will be planted in conjunction with Trees Atlanta, Georgia Trees Coalition, U.S. Forestry Service, American Forests, and Trees Working for Tomorrow Foundation;

Stream/Stream Bank Restoration:

- Procter Creek, a tributary of the Chattahoochee River, has little life left in it. Working with the city, with Roy F. Weston Company, and with an arm of Americorps, the neighborhood will clean the Creek and develop streambank stabilization;
- GEO, working with the stakeholders who

live or own businesses along Proctor Creek, will develop a Protection and Management Plan for the whole of the waterway;

- Working with the Environmental Forum and the student environmental organization from Georgia Tech, the neighborhood will establish monitoring stations for Proctor Creek;

Neighborhood Design:

- Each block in the neighborhood, working with students from the School of Environmental Design from the University of Georgia, will design its own sidewalks and the public spaces in the block;
- Each household will be taught how to compost. For those who do not wish to have their own compost bin, two central composting sites will be provided and maintained by the Neighborhood Association;
- All playground equipment and the park benches will be made from recycled material. A neighborhood recycling program will collect materials to be recycled into the equipment;
- Other programs to train households in how they can be sustainable are in the planning stage.

A board has been formed to oversee the project. Fourteen leaders from many sectors of Atlanta's leadership have joined with members from the community to direct the project. The board has been meeting for over a year to lay the plans and to gather widespread support for the overall project and its many components.

Making the vision a reality

One of the larger barriers to the project lies in the procurement of funds for a full-time staff person. The community has been able to obtain volunteer assistance from a landscape architect, an architect designing the community center, and nearby universities, as well as representatives from organizations such as the president of Safeplay Systems. Once plans are in place, two weekends will be set aside to bring everyone together to do an old fashioned "barn-raising" in which the majority of work on the community center will be completed. The goal is to finish the project, including the trails and planting of the trees, by Summer 1996.

—Community Sustainability Resource Institute

How To Get in Touch with Carve Hills Neighborhood Project

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Scope: Neighborhood, urban
Inception Date: 1964 Carver Hills Civic League formed; revitalized as Carver Hills Neighborhood Assoc., Inc. in 1989
Participants: Neighborhood residents, non-profit organizations, public agencies, businesses
Project type: Leadership development, redevelopment, urban forestry, "community organizing from an ecological perspective"
Methods used: Citizen empowerment and participation through monthly meetings, civic participation, community events and fund-raisers, annual events, clean up campaigns
Lessons learned: Strong leadership, tenacious and active community participation, partnership between local community and state organizations, and assistance from local and national grassroots organizations are important.



UPDATE

December 1997

Carver Hills' progress since 1995 has been mixed. The community has received awards (including the first "National Community Restoration Award," in recognition of its work in restoring their natural heritage, presented by U.S. Secretary of the Interior, Bruce Babbitt in March 1997), made headway toward its objectives, and at the same time experienced distressing setbacks.

- The Gun Club Land Fill is capped and attractively landscaped.
- In late 1995 funds were secured to support a full-time staff person to concentrate solely on Carver Hills. The President of the CHNA served in this

position for a year and a half. Additional funding, however, was not secured and leadership languished since Spring 1997.

- The community center design was begun by an architect in conjunction with the community and Advisory Council. The plans went through a number of iterations in response to community input. Because of unforeseen circumstances the plans were never completed. A class at the Georgia Tech School of Architecture presented 47 concept drawings for consideration but then refused to release them to the community. An attempt in 1997 to secure funding to finish the concept stage and develop a full set of construction drawings was unsuccessful. Nothing more has happened.
- The Saporta Nature Preserve (±1.5 acres) was developed with trails, an outdoor classroom, some signage, and easy access to Proctor Creek. An adjacent 1.5-acre plot has been secured to expand the preserve to three full acres. The other wilderness area (3 acres) on the other side of the community will be included in the riparian corridor, mentioned below.
- Several clean-ups of Proctor Creek have occurred with the removal of massive amounts of debris, including tires, hot water heaters, and shopping carts.
- The project to identify, categorize, and catalog all sources of pollution (both point and non-point source) will begin in 1998. The Community Watershed Coordinator of GEO will direct this program.
- A riparian corridor on a portion of Proctor Creek that includes Carver Hills will be developed. It will serve as a prototype for the City of Atlanta to use on its other streams. A riparian corridor will be constructed, Spring 1999, for the rest of Proctor Creek. Out of this will come a Management and Protection Plan for the creek.
- The School of Environmental Design at the University of Georgia presented the community with six concept designs for the community park and a comprehensive plan for the community as a whole. Once the Community Center has been designed, these plans will be brought into play to tie the Center, the Park, and the motifs of the entire community together in a unified expression.

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