



# MLK PARK NEIGHBORHOOD QUALITY OF LIFE STUDY

CITY OF GRAND RAPIDS DESIGN, DEVELOPMENT & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT  
LONG RANGE PLANNING DIVISION

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01

# INTRODUCTION TO THE MLK QUALITY OF LIFE STUDY

# INTRODUCTION

The Martin Luther King Jr. (MLK) Park Neighborhood is located on the southeast side of the City, generally bounded by Franklin / Hall Street to Kalamazoo / Adams Street (north-south) and Eastern Street to Giddings / Philadelphia Street (west-east). The neighborhood is located in the third ward and makes up a large portion of the 49507 zip code. The neighborhood has a rich history that is a source of pride for many neighbors. There are a large number of home-owners and long-term residents in this neighborhood as well as newer residents, creating a diverse, caring, and hospitable community. Homes in the neighborhood contribute to a historical character, and the neighborhood is generally regarded by new-comers to be safe and clean. However, issues like community mistrust, predatory solicitation, inadequate funding support from community stakeholders, and the absence of a neighborhood association to support resident voice, organize regular events and implement programming have made it difficult for this neighborhood to thrive. This final report does not necessarily reflect the entirety of the MLK Park Neighborhood, but rather the core area of concern.



Over the past several years, changes have become evident in the neighborhood. New residents have fueled concerns around gentrification of the neighborhood. At the same time, long-term residents struggle to overcome a history of inequity, being disregarded and often underfunded. Residents have seldom been given an opportunity to speak up for themselves or work together to advance a mutual interest through involvement in a planning process. Because of this history and the changes occurring, it was important to provide a platform to build up resident voice through authentic, inclusionary community engagement. Specifically, the City of Grand Rapids wanted to better understand quality of life in the neighborhood, work along-side residents to develop actionable steps to help improve their experiences, and empower them for self-leadership and representation moving forward.

In 2017, the City of Grand Rapids received a grant from the WK Kellogg Foundation to assess employment and career pathways for residents by developing an infrastructure within the city and in neighborhoods where residents can connect to employers, workforce partners and community/economic development entities to improve the economic conditions of families and neighborhoods. The MLK Park Neighborhood was identified as one of the key areas of focus under this endowment. In order to accomplish this work, the Neighborhood Connectors initiative was established under the City's Executive Office.

The Neighborhood Connectors began canvassing a #-block area of the MLK Park neighborhood to inform residents about upcoming programming and opportunities to “be the change” they wished to see in their neighborhood. A host of listening sessions, trainings and block club meetings began to unfold in the neighborhood. Based on resident feedback, the boundaries of the outreach were expanded, additional canvassers were engaged, and resident leadership training was extended. This groundwork was critical to begin to build resident voice and leadership capacity in the neighborhood. The

culmination of this first phase resulted in a few strong and active block clubs in the neighborhood, as well as a broader group of residents open to continued involvement.

Phase two of this process focused on further building the neighborhood's capacity for self-leadership, including creation of a document that captured the vision of the neighborhood and an action plan to guide the forming neighborhood association. The City's Planning Department was engaged to help design the process and facilitate engagement and drafting of the report. The City's Park and Recreation Department also became a partner in this collaborative effort, given the prominence of MLK Park in the neighborhood and its opportunity to act as a catalyst for positive improvements. This effort is known as the Quality of Life Study and is chronicled in this final report.

Through the Quality of Life process, the City wanted to intentionally engage long-term minority neighbors who hadn't previously been a part of the process, affirm the feedback derived during our initial engagement with the neighborhood and obtain confirmation on certain decisions related to park improvements and activation that had been contemplated by residents in the past. Barack Obama once said, "We are the change we have been waiting for" and this final report outlines a resident-centric plan that was birthed by neighbors, for neighbors. It seamlessly blends environmental, economic and social equity goals to promote vitality and sustainability in a resource-rich neighborhood that deserves revitalization.



# REIMAGINE



# YOUR



# NEIGHBORHOOD



## MLK PARK

NEIGHBORHOOD QUALITY OF LIFE  
IMPROVEMENT STUDY 2019

## Vision Statement – The Why

Our neighborhood envisions a safe, supportive, inclusive community built on our rich history, neighborhood voice and mutual respect.

## Mission Statement – The How

To advocate for and offer a wide-range of programs, opportunities, and resources that will enhance overall quality of life in the neighborhood.

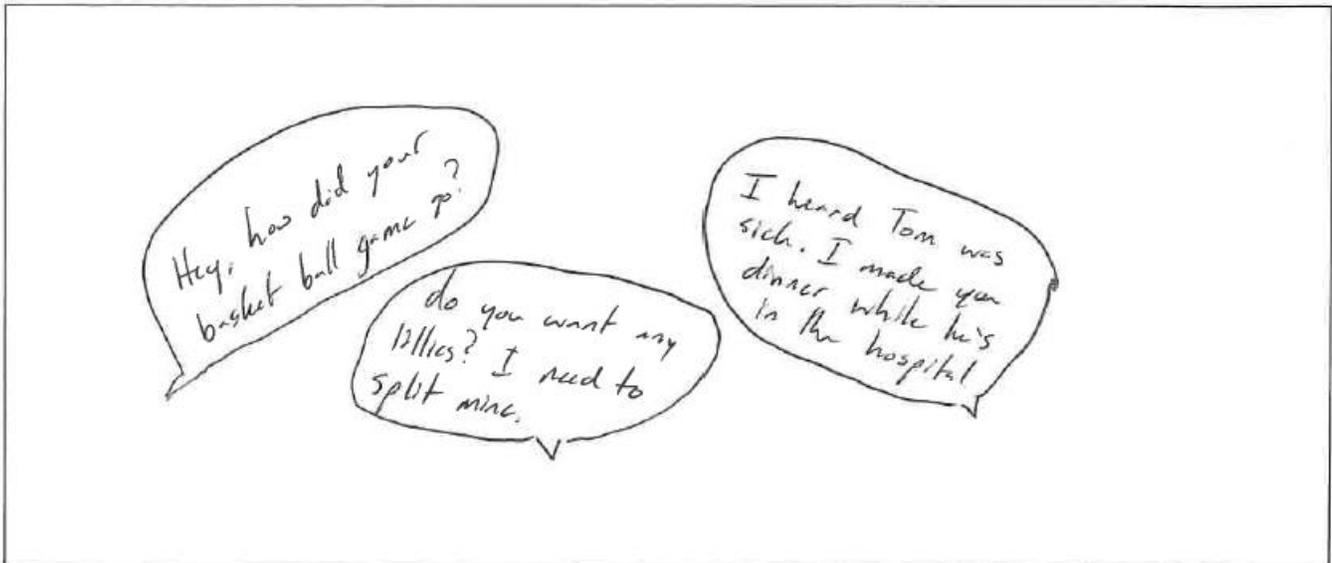
## Values

We believe there are shared ideals and resources necessary for a daily life of mutual support and respect in our neighborhood. The Values the guide our decisions include:

- Diversity and Inclusion
- Community Health
- Accountability
- Education
- Safe Spaces
- Equity
- Leadership
- Environmental Stewardship /Sustainability
- Collaboration / Partnership
- Access
- Economic Opportunity

We hope that MLK Park residents, neighbors and community partners will embrace collaboration to become a more hospitable, family-friendly, accessible, safe, green, historic neighborhood where ALL people can live, work, and play in a supportive, inclusive community.

### DRAW A PICTURE:



**Background Information:** During the Quality of Life Study Process, neighbors were given a chance to participate in a vision exercise where neighbors could write a statement or draw a picture that depicted their idea of the future state of the neighborhood. They were prompted with the statement: I envision the MLK Park Neighborhood to be a place where... The vision and values statements are a culmination of their collective responses.

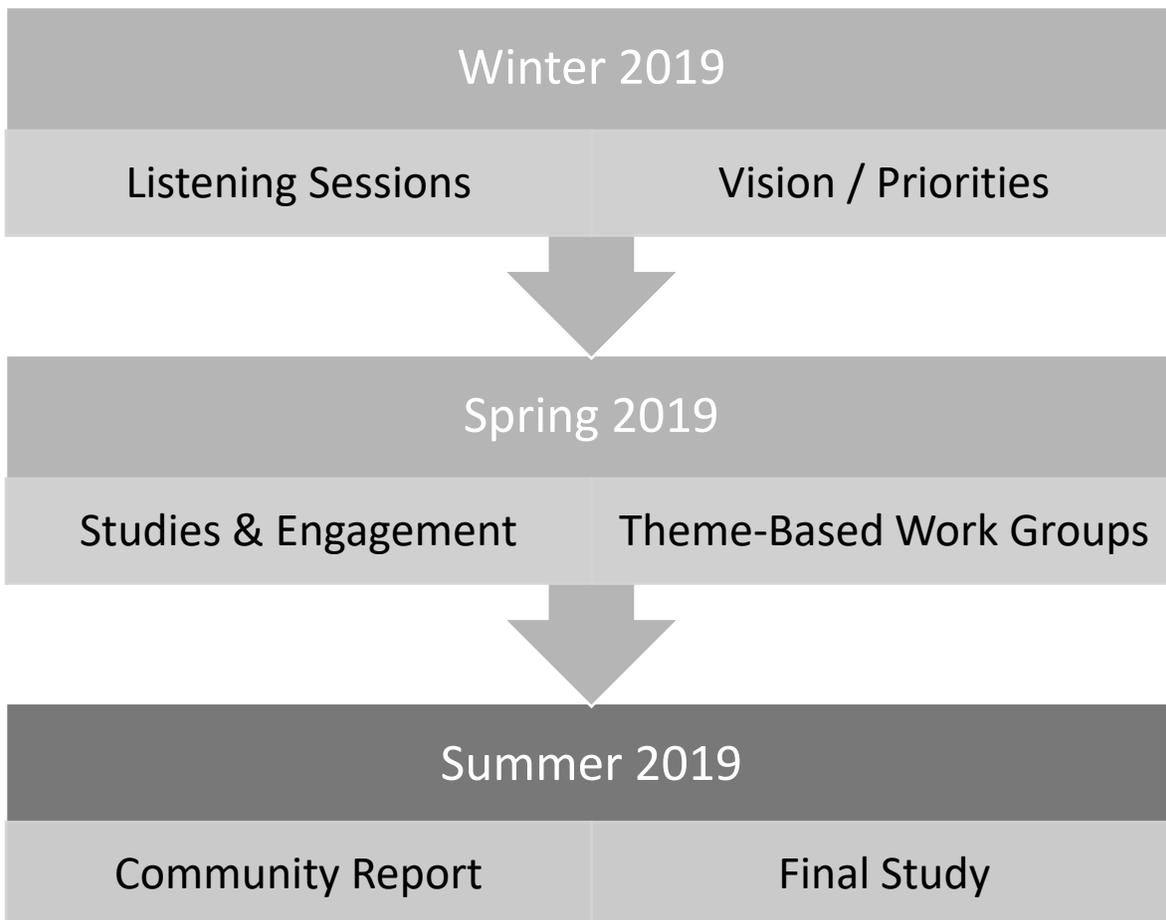
# PURPOSE & INTENT

The Quality of Life Study process was created to be a multi-layered framework for neighbors, fostering participation and involvement in a way that would not only positively impact experiences based on urban planning and design but that would also produce increased, equitable outcomes for all. Our goals for the MLK Park Neighborhood were derived out of the desire to lift-up resident voice, build leadership capacity and to empower the community to recognize that “they are the change they have been waiting for”. Through this process, the City of Grand Rapids sought to hear from a wide variety of stakeholders and expand neighborhood voice.

It was also designed to enable residents to develop mutual understanding and create a new shared vision for the future. As a final product, we wished for residents to identify collaborative, community-based solutions and defined measurable outcomes for those recommendations.

The intent was to empower neighborhood champions to work toward improving quality of life for ALL who live, work and play in the MLK Park Neighborhood. It is through innovative community engagement practices like “Quality of Life” that the MLK Park neighbors can successfully foster community ownership of the process and will be able to successfully carry the work through to implementation.

# QUALITY OF LIFE SUMMARY TIMELINE



# PROCESS OVERVIEW

The MLK Park Neighborhood Quality of Life Study was an innovative and multi-faceted approach to re-engaging the neighborhood and understanding how various people experience quality of life in this community. The goal was to engage residents through active listening, visioning exercises, and prioritization of the communities' vision into concrete recommendations. Equally important was creating a process that was intentionally designed to be inclusive and accessible to all members of the MLK Park community.

## Listening Sessions

In order to create a study that reflected the voice of MLK Park residents, the advisory team wanted to begin the process by listening to residents, business owners, leaders from near neighborhoods and others who have vested interests in the MLK Park area. Each listening session agenda called on residents to identify Strengths, Weaknesses, and opportunities & Threats (SWOT Analysis) and provided time for a facilitated discussion and open dialogue amongst neighbors. Three sessions were held, beginning in February 2019 at the MLK Park Lodge. Through these meetings, we were able to hear from and document over 100 resident voices in the MLK Park community.

## Session 1: Neighborhood Champion Convening

The City of Grand Rapids wanted to empower more people in the neighborhood not only to become a part of the planning process but also to build stronger relationships with various city departments. It was equally important to circle back to make sure that more minority voices were represented during this part of the process particularly because the voices of some long-term or historical residents had been muted in the past. Based on this, we began with a neighborhood champion convening where we intentionally invited minority residents that had been living in the neighborhood for at least 10 years to help create people-based solutions to accommodate all neighbors in the MLK Park community. This was our opportunity to not only work alongside them but to ultimately become accountable to them as well. It was critical that we designed a process that enabled residents to be participants while the city listened carefully to their descriptions of the lived experiences they desire.

## Sessions 2 & 3: Community Listening Sessions

The remaining two sessions were open invitation, with the intent to reach as many neighborhood residents as possible. These included a Breakfast of Champions listening session on a Saturday morning and a Community Dinner on a Thursday night. These sessions followed the same format of the Neighborhood Champion Convening, including SWOT Analysis and facilitated discussions.

## Neighborhood Knowledge Exchange

Affirmation is necessary in order to authentically lift-up resident voice, maintain community interest and create alignment for the journey ahead. After the Quality of Life listening sessions, neighbors were invited back together for a Neighborhood Knowledge Exchange. This was an open-house style event, held on March 18th and attended by over 50 people from the community.

The purpose of this meeting was to provide a report out on the information gathered from those sessions and ask, “Did we get it right?” The Neighbor Knowledge Exchange event was also an opportunity for residents to participate in new activities which helped prioritize information gathered in the listening sessions and determine next steps. These activities included asset mapping (where neighbors were asked to share their skills), additional fact gathering on areas of improvement in the neighborhood, and dot voting activities where neighbors were asked to vote on themes that resonated most with them based on exercises from the listening session. When the work group phase began, the neighbors were eager to make a positive contribution to the work because they felt they were a part of the process and a valued piece of the puzzle.

SHARE  
YOUR  
SKILLS

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NAME

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HOW MANY YEARS  
IN THE MLK PARK  
NEIGHBORHOOD?

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SKILLS

**Note:** The silhouette used for the Asset Mapping activity required residents to list their name, how many years they have lived, worked or played in the MLK Park Neighborhood and asked participants to list their skills. On the back of the form we asked for personal contact and demographic information. We intentionally placed that form on the back so that neighbor information wasn't easily detectable by the other participants to maintain confidentiality. We added a line for race/ethnicity to make sure we were capturing minorities in the neighborhood who may not have been properly engaged in the past.



### Work Group Meetings

Following the Quality of Life listening sessions we were ready to begin the next phase of the Quality of Life study. This study and engagement phase provided for two important working groups with the following themes:

**Neighborhood Building** - The purpose of this work group was to build resident voice and leadership capacity with diverse representation from various stakeholders in the neighborhood.

**Park Improvements & Activation** – The purpose of this work group was to build and support community engagement and serve as an ad hoc committee under the neighborhood association to monitor developments and park improvements in the neighborhood. This work group will also play a vital role in planning events that bring people together.

We exceeded our goal of 6-8 people for each work group and were able to engage 29 neighbors, each eager to do their part. The work groups met bi-weekly for eight sessions, beginning in March. Meetings

were held at MLK Park Lodge and at Life Quest Ministries. The Work groups began by drafting guiding principles and developing and understanding mission, vision, and values. They were provided Action-Decision Logs for the purpose of tracking their roles and responsibilities. They were also given a spreadsheet where they would ultimately draft final recommendations for the City of Grand Rapids and other stakeholders to take into consideration as funding becomes available and development decisions are being made. The Final recommendations spreadsheet provided residents an opportunity to draft and revise final recommendations to improve quality of life in the neighborhood. It also challenged them to think about key partner and ownership organizations, a timeline and measurements of success.

### Quality of Life Wrap-Up and Celebration

A final combined event was held to recognize participants and celebrating the work they had accomplished with their families, friends and the community at-large. All participants received a Certificate of Participation that was signed by the Mayor.

# PART 1 - Fill in the Blanks



Before the Quality of Life process began, the Neighborhood Connectors were working closely with members of the community to build a foundation for leadership. There were many neighbors that were involved in the formation and execution of Block Clubs before the QOL work group phase even began. This is important to note because these neighborhood champions received Neighborhood Association Start-up Training, hosted regular block club meetings and listening sessions and conducted a mock neighborhood Association meeting with various city departments including GRPD. This is an important distinction because during this process, neighborhood boundaries were expanded, and the scope of the work began to broaden. Residents were already beginning to understand the importance of working together and the power of collective impact, so many were ripe to push this work forward. However, the area of focus was also expanded after this first phase, requiring a process that acknowledged the work already completed, but also allowed additional residents to get 'up to

speed' and involved in the process. Finally, the QOL process would provide leaders in the community with more tools to address some the issues that exist in the neighborhood.

The Quality of Life Study process has shown us that as a City that is growing and thriving exponentially, our outcomes are dependent on not telling people how they need to live but rather listening to how people want to live. Deep listening and understanding provided increased knowledge about how the people of the MLK Park area currently experience life in the neighborhood and eliminated some assumptions and preconceived notions about what we thought what was needed to improve quality of life in this community. Residents also shared their personal stories and learned from one another.

Through this process, residents were also able to create community agreements, which established expectations and rules for future meetings. This was important in order to maintain a safe and respectful environment/experience. **(See Appendix X for a full listing of the MLK Park Neighborhood Community agreements.)**

The three listening sessions provided a great deal of invaluable feedback and helped the City of Grand Rapids better understand what makes the neighborhood strong and what areas of the neighborhood could be improved. Reoccurring themes began to emerge from the listening sessions. Areas of key concern throughout them included:

- Fears regarding safety of the neighborhood and conflicts with the Grand Rapids Police Department
- Housing challenges such as long-time residents receiving frequent solicitations to sell homes at less than market rate and older residents who wish to age-in-place but are not equipped to do so

- Road condition and maintenance concerns, including condition of roads, parking challenges, and snow removal
- Youth concerns, including a lack of positive activities and outlets for teenagers and youth in the neighborhood.

We also heard quite frequently that the MLK Park Lodge is in dire need of repairs and is therefore, grossly under-utilized. Overarching these issues, many neighbors said “we need to grow our neighborhood association and work together to create a shared vision for the future-state of the neighborhood”. These topics were captured in the Mini Report provided back to residents at the Neighborhood Knowledge Exchange.



In a QOL Vision Exercise one neighbor stated: I envision the MLK Park Neighborhood to be a place where...

*"Neighbors are connected. Our older population have stayed connected and are the heart of our neighborhood. The park is utilized for events, city projects and neighborhood clean-ups. Our neighborhood is changing in a monthly basis with new residents, home owners and renters. I envision a place where yards are kept up and neighbors care."*

As the process continued, the complex nature of the MLK Park neighborhood and its conflict points further emerged. For example, for some neighbors a more gentrified neighborhood evokes feelings of fear and uncertainty. For these people there was an underlying notion that the City of Grand Rapids can't be trusted and this process was a merely a result of a strategic effort to redevelop the area for the benefit of white residents who have recently moved into the neighborhood. Neighbors expressed concerns about potential displacement and being left out of economic opportunities for minority entrepreneurs and small businesses. By contrast, residents also reported that they appreciate the diversity in gender, race,

ethnicity and socio-economic status that exists in the neighborhood as a result of recent investment and improvements. These residents characterized the neighborhood as resource rich with many different schools, churches, community centers and transportation options for neighbors. They value having different cultures, perspectives and new people that widen the pool of talent that already exists in the neighborhood.

We grappled with issues and had hard conversations about the past, present and future of the neighborhood and as a result a reinvigorated group of resident leaders and neighborhood champions emerged.



Intentionality, a strategic framework and active listening were integral parts of this community engagement process. The data and the feedback we gathered from residents was very important but establishing a relationship with neighbors based on humility, honesty and trust is what gave the quality of life study the ability to take root in the neighborhood. We were able to establish a collaborative partnership created by understanding our interdependence on one another, maintaining accountability, uplifting residents and understanding the power of teamwork. This ultimately “filled in the blanks” and prepared the neighborhood to embark upon the formalization of the Neighborhood Association and creation of action plans around neighborhood building and parks improvement and activation.



**WE are the change  
we've been waiting for!**



 **MLK PARK**  
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NEIGHBORHOOD QUALITY OF LIFE  
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In a QOL Vision Exercise one neighbor stated: I envision the MLK Park Neighborhood to be a place where... "We can greet everyone we see; connect, help and feel safe as a diverse neighborhood".



# MLK PARK

NEIGHBORHOOD QUALITY OF LIFE  
IMPROVEMENT STUDY 2019

## 2019 MINI-REPORT

FROM RECENT NEIGHBORHOOD ENGAGEMENT

### STRENGTHS

- Location (Proximity to Downtown, schools, near neighborhoods and business districts)
- Historical character of the neighborhood
- MLK Park – large, multi-use, has one of the few pools in the City
- Affordable large family homes
- Diversity of residents
- Easy access to transportation / Mobility
- Longtime home owners in the neighborhood
- Welcoming / Neighborly / Hospitable
- Talented people
- Historical context and solid foundation to build up resident voice and leadership capacity in the neighborhood.

### THREATS

- We experience racism often.
- We want a neighborhood that doesn't have many empty houses or vacant spaces.
- We want neighbor and visitors to keep our community clean.
- Zoning changes, land use ordinances and development effect the way we live and learn.
- We want a neighborhood with curb appeal and well maintained streets.
- Drug activity and gun violence make the neighborhood unsafe for all people.
- Historical residents are being pressured to sell or being forced out of their homes.
- There is a lot of bad press about our neighborhood.
- We don't have a consolidated neighborhood identity.
- Development without neighbor engagement evokes displacements.

### WEAKNESSES

- We lack RESPECT in our neighborhood.
- Negative stigma & community perception associated with our neighborhood.
- Gentrification
- Over-policing, police abuse of power, racial profiling and harassment
- Inability to activate neighbors to be involved.
- We don't feel safe.
- We are not unified and collaborative in our efforts.
- We experience high rates of crime and drug activity.
- We lack an economic presence that is reflective of neighbors.

### OPPORTUNITIES

- We want to be a consistent voice and better advocates for ourselves.
- We want more opportunities to gather and fellowship with neighbors.
- Our teenagers and youth need something to do.
- We want to create a shared succession plan that builds legacy and preserves generational roots in our neighborhood.
- We need to be accountability partners for cleanliness, safety and responsible development.
- We want equitable information and access to Marijuana programming and business opportunities.
- We want to revive our Neighborhood Association and Neighborhood Watch status.
- The MLK Park lodge is not being used as intended and we want to activate the space for use by families in the neighborhood.
- We want leisure educational activities and opportunities to improve quality of life for all.
- Our elderly residents need regular wellness checks from neighbors.

## PARK IMPROVEMENTS & ACTIVATION

The City of Grand Rapids Parks Department in conjunction with the Neighborhood Association, resident volunteers and other community stakeholders implement a series of immediate park maintenance programs like pulling weeds, tree trimming, painting Pergola's at the pool and laying down mulch in flower beds to help beautify the park and build relationships between neighbors.

Provide clear communication of park requirements and expectations to create and maintain a safe and secure park. Install Park Rules and Usage Signage in MLK Park that displays park hours, city ordinances and other pertinent park use information.

Ensure community involvement in all phases of the Feasibility Study of the MLK Park Lodge and proactively seek the inclusion of minority contractors and artisans to diversify the pool of applicants.

Demonstrate the commitment to improved quality of life in the neighborhood through a concerted and substantial investment in MLK Park by the City of Grand Rapids and other stakeholders.

Renovate the MLK Park Lodge to create a modernized, aesthetically pleasing community venue and rental facility that is safe and affordable for public use.

Activate MLK Park by creating new events-based activities that will create active, regular uses on a monthly basis, including the winter season.

Implement new street parking rules and regulations in the neighborhood to ease parking in the neighborhood for residents.

## NEIGHBORHOOD BUILDING

The Neighborhood Association finalizes its name, creates a logo and develops a communication plan that outlines goals and objectives for messaging, community awareness and expanded outreach. MLK Neighborhood Association will launch a website for neighbors to access information related to meetings, upcoming events, and methods of contacting the association.

Objective: Connect with every household in the area so that at least 75% of neighbors will know about the newly revitalized neighborhood association.

Create an annual calendar of outreach and resident engagement for the MLK Park Neighborhood. This annual list should also include activation events implemented by the MLK Park Neighborhood Association and other community partners.

Build positive relationships with the police in the neighborhood based on comradery and trust, including utilization of MLK Park for events and activities that will facilitate relationship building with neighbors and community stakeholders.

Provide comprehensive resources for long-term minority and all neighbors to Age In Place

Create a Summer Youth Employment program where teenagers in our neighborhood can work with local landscapers, the Parks department and other professionals to increase beautification through collaborative action.



# MLK PARK

NEIGHBORHOOD QUALITY OF LIFE  
IMPROVEMENT STUDY 2019

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS & TAKEAWAYS

# PART 2 - PROJECT REIMAGINE: THE FUTURE STATE OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD



Change is afoot in the neighborhood and residents have been working together to organize and engage neighbors. On the surface it may seem that very little is being done to address issues like racism, drug activity, gun violence, tensions with police, and long-term minority residents being pressured to sell but things are in fact changing. This is a result of residents, neighbors and stakeholders working together to make regular, positive contributions to the process.

The FUTURE STATE of the MLK Park Neighborhood is a place where any one can live, learn, work or belong. It is a neighborhood where residents have a consistent voice and are better advocates for themselves. It is a strong community with many opportunities to gather and fellowship in a clean, safe and secure environment.

The Quality of Life Study pursued two focus areas, with the intent to move the neighborhood towards this vision. The first, Park Improvements and Activation, worked to identify and prioritize park improvements that are necessary to provide a clean, safe and welcoming public space for all neighbors to enjoy. The Parks Yes! Mileage passed in 2013 which provided \$900,000.00 in investment needed to address safety concerns and infrastructural upgrades in the park. In the past, the Parks & Recreation Department reached out to the community to obtain feedback on what neighbors desired most in terms of

improvements. As a result of that feedback, the Park will receive additional lighting, a new picnic shelter with ADA compliant picnic tables and playground improvements in the coming months. There is additional funding available to make updates and changes to the MLK Park Lodge. The Quality of Life Study was used as an opportunity to engage the community around these improvements, as well as the future use of the lodge. With the discontinuation of the boxing program that was once housed in the space, a new vision emerged for an improved facility that can function as a multi-use, rentable space. The work group also wanted to determine how to positively activate residents and neighbors in the park as partners.

While this is definitely a sign of progress, during the quality of life process we learned that there is desire for additional Park Improvements that residents view as a high priority, including the removal or replacement of dead trees. The study also identified longer-term recommendations to improve the park, including installation of a second pavilion and playground, installing technology hardware for internet accessibility, the addition of outdoor exercise equipment and creating an irrigation plan for the grass, shrubs and flowers in the park. (See Appendix X for more long term final recommendations from residents.)

Neighbors see MLK Park and the MLK Park Lodge playing a vital role in bringing all people together. They are committed to providing continued support for community engagement, including creation of an ad hoc committee with the Park Improvements & Activation neighborhood champions to work directly with the Parks and Recreation Department, to monitor developments and park improvements in the neighborhood, and ensure diverse representation from the neighborhood.

The second major focus of the Study and a critical element to achieving the desired future state for MLK Park is Neighborhood Building. Specifically, residents are working towards the MLK Park Neighborhood Association becoming a formal structure that promotes civic engagement, builds human capacity and serves as a conduit for the facilitation of some QOL final recommendations.

They are also committed to ensuring that there is diverse representation from various stakeholders in the neighborhood that represent a myriad of lived experiences. Specifically, it is important to maintain uninterrupted and intentional engagement of minorities, including additional work to reach Latinx residents in the neighborhood.

In the future, the Neighborhood Association and the Neighborhood Watch program have been revived and people look out for each other. Teenagers and youth have something to do and elderly residents get regular wellness checks from neighbors. There are less vacant spaces, more minority owned businesses, better parking options available and a newly renovated lodge that can be used by families in the neighborhood. It is a community where all people can thrive and not just survive.

The work groups have created many sound recommendations that will require additional city staffing support, facilitation, additional funding and collaborative work effort for implementation. The formation of new partnerships between agencies, maintaining flexibility in terms of the journey ahead, and added economic investment play a vital role in the way the neighborhood evolves and how quality of life improves over time.

02

# QUALITY OF LIFE FOCUS AREAS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

# Neighborhood Building

## Problem Statement

One of the most critical issues that affect the MLK Park Neighborhood is the absence of a fully functioning Neighborhood Association. The MLK Park Neighborhood Association was originally established in XXXX and dissolved in XXXX. For the last XX years, the neighborhood has not had a consolidated neighborhood identity, which has stifled progress. When operating at disadvantage like this neighbors feel disregarded, interests rarely align and engaged residents often feel overwhelmed.

One of the primary purposes of the Quality of life study was to help develop a shared vision for the neighborhood for the advancement of mutual resident interests. During the Quality of life listening sessions, we heard many neighbors express an interest in reviving the Neighborhood Association and their Neighborhood Watch status. As a result, additional organizing, support and facilitation was needed for neighbors during the engagement process to properly prepare them to work within the framework of a traditional neighborhood association.

In addition to the organizational aspects, the Study also facilitated important conversations to help the neighborhood reevaluate their identity and goals. The neighborhood has seen many new neighbors coming in and even more minority residents moving out. This creates a problem for ensuring that there is adequate representation from a cross-section of neighbors that matches the diversity of the neighborhood.

The lack of a neighborhood association has also contributed to residents being disconnected from community resources. Reestablishment of the association could repair this broken path of communication and establish a reference system for problem solving within the neighborhood. Residents also view the role of the association as a group of advocates or champions that neighbors with quieter voices can rely on to help them navigate through complex system issues. They also expressed interest in working together through the Association as accountability partners for cleanliness, safety and responsible development in the neighborhood.

## Engagement

### Matthew Downey / Ciarra Atkins

The Neighborhood Building work group was facilitated by Matthew Downey and Ciara Adkins. Because the revitalization of the neighborhood association is so important for the advancement of the neighborhood, the City of Grand Rapids retained the services of these skilled providers to assist residents in creating a formal neighborhood association.

Matthew Downey is a passionate and skilled consultant with years of experience working with the GVSU Johnson Center for Philanthropy, various neighborhoods, agencies and local non-profits. Ciara Atkins is a young, licensed attorney who grew up in the MLK neighborhood and specializes in Business Entity Formation & Intellectual Property Law. Both of these individuals were brought in board because at the City, we have learned that quality of life efforts are best led by people who can connect to residents based on shared experiences, empathy and understanding. This makes engagement far more effective and breaks down barriers for establishing community trust.

### Goals & Opportunities

This work group's primary goal was to begin understanding and working toward becoming a formal 501(c) 3 organization. As a result of that some of their initial goals stemmed around creating more opportunities for fellowship together,

promoting civic engagement, building human capacity, understanding roles and responsibilities of a neighborhood association and listing out priorities for the next year. The work group began laying the foundation for potential resident-led events, taking advantage of opportunities for collaboration like Art Prize: Project 1 and generating a detailed list of ideas for year round activation and programming.

The Quality of Life Study brought about a spike in participation and there were many residents that worked in this setting building on the foundation that had been laid by several members of the pre-existing block clubs. But not only that, as opportunities arose to serve in other capacities like participating in the Neighborhood Leadership Academy and serving on the the Parks & Recreation Feasibility Study Steering Committee, neighbors welcomed these platforms for continued participation.

The MLK Park Neighborhood Association was formally endorsed by the state of Michigan in June of 2019. The Neighborhood Association will begin meeting formally in the fall of this year. Some of the main objectives for their initial meetings will include board training, determining their official name, logo design, branding/messaging and the formation of a neighborhood engagement committee. This work group will also discuss and finalize quality of life strategy and implementation through fiscal year 2021.

It is important to note that the group decided to keep the MLK Park Lodge as a location to house the Neighborhood Association and to host its monthly meetings in the future. In an effort to expand outreach to even more people in the neighborhood, it is important that the association is visible and centrally located which isn't a new concept because the lodge housed the association in the past.

This work group was comprised of two neighborhood Building Co-chairs, city staff, community stakeholders and mostly MLK Park neighborhood residents. Several members of this work group will continue to meet during phase 3 of this process with added input from other neighbors for the design and implementation of the new neighborhood association formal structure. Both Matthew Downey and Ciarra Adkins will continue to play a vital role in the formation process.

## **Recommendations**

### **Final recommendations provided by the Neighborhood Building Work Group are as follows:**

- Finalize the Neighborhood Association name, creates a logo and develops a communication plan that outlines goals and objectives for messaging, community awareness and expanded outreach.  
**Objective:** Connect with every household in the area so that at least 75% of neighbors will know about the newly revitalized neighborhood association.
- Create an annual calendar of outreach and resident engagement for the MLK Park Neighborhood. This annual list should also include activation events implemented by the MLK Park Neighborhood Association and other community partners.
- Build positive relationships with the police in the neighborhood based on comradery and trust, including utilization of MLK Park for events and activities that will facilitate relationship building with neighbors and community stakeholders.
- Provide comprehensive resources for long-term minority and all neighbors to Age in Place.
- Implement new street parking rules and regulations in the neighborhood to ease parking in the neighborhood for residents.
- Create a Summer Youth Employment program where teenagers in our neighborhood can work with local landscapers, the Parks department and other professionals to increase beautification through collaborative action.

See Appendix X for full Recommendation Matrix.

## Accomplishments

The Neighborhood Building work group accomplished many things to be proud of during the quality of life process in terms of laying the foundation for the association. One of the biggest tasks they successfully completed as a large group was the creation of the Mission and Vision statement for their organization. We spent a lot of time tackling the “how” and the “why” but eventually the group created two statements that equaled one voice. This acclamation would be very important along with the creation of bylaws and the identification of incorporators from the neighborhood in order to push the work forward.

## ***Vision Statement - The Why***

**Our neighborhood envisions a safe, supportive, inclusive community built on our rich history, neighborhood voice and mutual respect.**

## ***Mission Statement - The How***

**To advocate for and offer a wide-range of programs, opportunities, and resources that will enhance overall quality of life in the neighborhood.**



Now that the Articles of Incorporation have been filed and the neighborhood association has been formally endorsed by the state of Michigan, some of the next steps include filing for a DBA Status (Doing Business As), requesting an Employee Identification Number (EIN) and beginning to work on the 1023ez application.

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# Park Improvements & Activation



## Problem Statement

Another important issue related to quality of life in the MLK Park neighborhood that was commonly brought up is the current status of the park as a public space and the MLK Park lodge. When we asked residents “what areas of the neighborhood could be improved”, we heard that there are several areas of MLK Park that are in dire need of repairs, improvements and infrastructural additions or changes. Currently there are several issues that make using the park as a gathering space, for any reason, less than ideal. Neighbors spoke of issues like the inability to water the grass in the park, the need for increased lighting, the absence of adequate pavilions, the need for increased signage in the park regarding city ordinances and the addition of pet waste stations just to name a few.

We learned that the residents in the neighborhood would really like to use the Park Lodge as a multi-purpose

space for classes, special events, family gatherings and community meetings. However, because the park lodge doesn’t currently have adequate lighting, there is a large boxing rig in the middle of the space, there is little to no active programming and large windows that are completely boarded up blocking sunlight, neighbors are not interested in using the lodge as a rentable facility in its current state. Some of the key considerations for renovations should include heating and cooling, natural lighting, LEAD and other hazard remediation, ADA compliance, and CPTED principles. Although neighbors recognize that MLK Park is a large multi-use space that has one of the few pools in the city, the locker rooms are in disrepair and the dimly lit, musty environment is not inviting, up-to-date or safe for neighbors.

Similarly, the neighborhood recognizes that there has been a lack of activation and programming in the park because of these same issues. Because there is an inadequate amount of activation and community engagement at MLK Park, it has become a gathering space for people from outside the neighborhood to engage in criminal activity which in turns brings more police to the park on a regular basis. As a result, many neighbors said they don't feel safe frequenting the park and they are unable to enjoy the park for its intended use. Without adequate lighting, signage to properly inform all people of park rules and the continual presence of GRPD who appear to be lurking and harassing neighbors without just cause, the park doesn't offer much safety and security for residents or neighbors passing by. Unfortunately this problem-cycle also inadvertently contributes to the negative stigma and community perception associated with the neighborhood.

Given the aforementioned reasons, the work group is recommending that the City of Grand Rapids and other stakeholders demonstrate a commitment to equity and improved quality of life in the neighborhood through concerted and substantial continued investment in MLK Park.

### **Engagement**

**(Insert text here)**

### **Recommendations**

- The City of Grand Rapids Parks Department in conjunction with the Neighborhood Association, resident volunteers and other community stakeholders implement a series of immediate park maintenance programs like pulling weeds, tree trimming, painting Pergola's at the pool and laying down mulch in flower beds to help beautify the park and build relationships between neighbors.
- Provide clear communication of park requirements and expectations to create and maintain a safe and secure park. Install Park Rules and Usage Signage in MLK Park that displays park hours, city ordinances and other pertinent park use information.
- Ensure community involvement in all phases of the Feasibility Study of the MLK Park Lodge and proactively seek the inclusion of minority contractors and artisans to diversify the pool of applicants.
- Activate MLK Park by creating new events-based activities that will create active, regular uses on a monthly basis, including the winter season.
- Renovate the MLK Park Lodge to create a modernized, aesthetically pleasing community venue and rental facility that is safe and affordable for public use.
- Demonstrate the commitment to improved quality of life in the neighborhood through a concerted and substantial investment in MLK Park by the City of Grand Rapids and other stakeholders.
- 

### **Accomplishments**

**Signage in the Park / Feasibility Study Committee Formed / Bids out / Activation of MLK Park lodge**

## **REOCCURRING NEIGHBORHOOD THEMES**

1. **Boxing Ring Discussion**
2. **Youth Engagement**
3. **Community Mistrust**
4. **Renovation of the lodge as a rentable space**
5. **Community Center Concept**

03

LESSONS LEARNED, FINAL  
RECOMMENDATIONS AND  
CONCLUSIONS

# QUALITY OF LIFE, DEFINED FOR THE MLK NEIGHBORHOOD

(INSERT TEXT HERE)

# TRANSFORMING ENGAGEMENT AND EMPOWERING RESIDENTS

## Collective Impact and the MLK Community Tool Box

Our process was detailed and strategic because the overall goal of the work groups was to consider the issues, contemplate viable solutions together and recommend ways stakeholders can implement change. Additional desired outcomes from the MLK Park Neighborhood Quality of Life Study included the further development of resident voice and capacity building, activation of the neighborhood and community-based solutions that residents could recognize as their own. The work groups under the QOL umbrella were a great pathway for the City of Grand Rapids to walk alongside neighbors and help them to focus and develop actionable steps to improve quality of life for all.



By using all of the aforementioned community engagement tools, we were able to assist the residents in creating key final recommendations and provide a platform for more residents to become neighborhood leaders. And in a community where the neighbors describe a strength in the neighborhood as an “abundance of talented and creative people”, this process was long overdue and welcomed by many who just need an opportunity to serve. These neighbors have a passion, dedication and enthusiasm that will serve the neighborhood for years to come. It is true, bad things will happen but how we respond to them defines character and quality of life.

Mark Washington, manager of the City of Grand Rapids has said, “it’s not fair for some neighborhoods to have dreams and others neighborhoods to have nightmares”. As the City of Grand Rapids works diligently to become a city that demonstrates the way we value equity, it is imperative that we continue to put people first through authentic, inclusionary community engagement. When you give all people a vested interest in sparking positive change in their community, it inevitably leads to an increased sense of team work, support, accountability and greater collective impact.

This study is also an appeal to the City and other community stakeholders to take the neighborhoods vision and focus on implementation. This work has undoubtedly been complex in nature, involving and affecting many vested stakeholders with diverse backgrounds and sometimes competing interests to create a shared vision for the advancement of the neighborhood. However, by being fully transparent, open to listening, the authentic exchange of information and supporting the facilitation of work groups, a historically bypassed neighborhood has been effectively engaged and resident voice and leadership capacity has been amplified.

Residents are gaining momentum in the MLK Park neighborhood and it is our hope that all stakeholders can build upon this foundation. These neighbors have been committed to the process and have put an unprecedented amount time and talent into creating viable solutions to improve quality of life for all people in the neighborhood. With additional resources, funding, and partnerships, the project can transition from development to execution. In order to improve the standard of life satisfaction, health, wealth and happiness experienced by MLK neighbors, we must work together for greater community control.



The exchange of thoughts, ideas and information is equally important because shared-knowledge in a community translates into greater understanding and empathy from grass roots to grass tops.

Removing barriers to participation is an effective community engagement tool, so we provided child care and food for our events as well.

## NEIGHBORHOOD ACTION PLAN

(INSERT TEXT HERE)

## LESSONS LEARNED AND CONCLUSIONS

(INSERT TEXT HERE)

04

# APPENDICES