

## ***Fourth Draft***

# **Urban Lab Fact Book: Cranston Street**

New Commons

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This is a draft fact book for Cranston Street. This one document contains the conditions, facts and projects, underway or planned that address the whole area. It is a multidisciplinary book, assembling what is known from different types of plans and from different people who don't always have the chance to communicate and share plans.

Note: Everything in this emerging fact book is draft. The facts have to be checked and added to. The ideas at this time are just that: ideas and not defined agreements or priorities. Content is added to the Fact Book as it become known.

### **I. What is the location?**

There are 3 segments of Cranston Street to consider in the lab process. Begin at Citizens Bank at Hoyle Square to Bridgham Street which is a 1-story building; then Bridgham Street to the turn in the road past the Armory, which is mid-rise area of up to 4 stories with significant retail; and from the turn in the road of Cranston Street to Route 10. We plan to go in one street deep – 10 to 15 houses – on both sides of Cranston Street.

As of now, we will concentrate on the more dense middle location of retail and the Armory.

### **II. What are the potential long-term goals for the location? Frame the goals as benefits**

- Make Cranston Street a visible part of the whole city based on the realization of what does it mean to be sandwiched in between two retail giants – Providence Place Mall and K-Mart shopping Center with Lowe's – and sandwiched between Southside and Onleyville? "If the neighborhood was wealthy, people would invest. If it were poor, people would want to help. But we are in the middle so we are forgotten."
- Make the Route Ten ramp onto Cranston Street one of the gateways to Providence
- Brand it – "the place where all cultures come together." The idea of a brand gives a sense of identity. Cranston Street runs the cultural gamut and that what's to be celebrated.

- Integrate housing, more density, retail, safety and recreation. Do all of it as one smart integrated process (as opposed to the current fragmentation of multiple, often conflicting processes, e.g., transportation or road improvements begin without coordinating with others). Update and coordinate all the plans, which are all old and outdated, except the community economic development plan. Declare the clarity required on how to implement the plan.
- Demonstrate to new urbanists what has been done with almost nothing and experience a neighborhood on the rise – opportunity for all of us to learn; we are not inviting in new urbanists to save the community.
- Address employment in general then make jobs as close as possible to where you live.
- As more good stuff happens on Cranston Street insure local ownership. If we improve conditions, property values will increase. What can be done? How do we build equity now? A new urbanist principle is mixed income: what can we learn that is applicable to Cranston Street?

### **III. What are the conditions – immediate and emerging – of the location?**

#### **What are the known facts about the location (that will serve as the foundation of the fact book – social, economic, ecological, community knowledge, cultural, & built environment)?**

- West Elmwood has the only intact, mixed-use, urban design in Providence featuring residential, commercial and industrial buildings and other design elements like recreational spaces. West Elmwood offers a historically intact urban design composed of a village center, retail stores, housing stock, open space and old mills. The fabric of the streets and the location of structures are well ordered. The history and stability of the urban fabric has high aesthetic appeal, albeit improvement is required. The place has a soul. It has a healthy urban design that no money could buy. All other Providence neighborhoods are missing one or more of the three types of buildings or design elements. West Elmwood also has the unused State Armory which, is slated for restoration and state-sponsored use. An active Armory will be an economic generator in the neighborhood. How aware are residents of the beautiful neighborhood urban design? Are they willing to value it? How do we codify what resident's value in the neighborhood?
- West Elmwood is one of the hottest and busiest neighborhoods with many projects simultaneously coming on-line. The neighborhood is in the midst of converting from an industrial use to more residential and mixed-use. Neighborhood is challenged to sustain local neighborhood commercial activity in zoned commercial areas. Where is the focused area for growing jobs (small

business and manual labor)? Areas of activity within the neighborhood are cohesive.

- Andres Duany, new urbanist and frequent contributor to the urban design and master plan of Providence, had this to say about West Elmwood as part of a work session two years ago: “Think of the neighborhood as it was defined historically; it may be two or three neighborhoods in one. Neighborhoods have natural beginnings and ends. Because of this, West Elmwood is at least two different places. People in the lower portion of the neighborhood, near the Cranston line, are oriented south away from Providence. Bones of the neighborhood are excellent. The main streets like Cranston Street are one of the best you can find.”
- How do we develop more of the open space? Bucklin Park is the best-kept secret with basketball courts and pool. Other assets include green space, trees, and sidewalks. A pond. Two historic districts: Armory and Bridgham. A green space park on Messer Street.
- Cranston St is 33 feet wide and 1.2 miles long.
- Population of 16,000.
- Current zoning overlay: a useful thing or not? (It will be gone in the planned zoning revisions.)
- Supply of large institutions.
- West Elmwood’s profile reveals a paradox. On the one hand, it is a place of unique character and tremendous capacity for economic development. Although, it is a neighborhood of lower-income immigrants (2000 median income was only 80% of citywide median) many longtime residents own their homes. Home ownership fosters a stable neighborhood. With a language other than English is spoken in about 70% of the neighborhood’s households, it offers rich cultural diversity upon which to build. The neighborhood is realizing itself—beginning to live its potential. On the other hand, more than half of all adults in West Elmwood have no high school diploma and 46 percent of its children live below poverty level. In addition, 25% of all households do not own automobiles nor have access to cars.

**Who lives there, works there, and who else relies on this place? Who has a stake in the place?**

- The neighborhood has a rich history of immigrants settling, learning and moving on over a long period. Despite these shifts, West Elmwood is a stable community because the rhythm is a normal one of taking in and turning out

different ethnic groups. These natural transitions occur over decades and not suddenly like in South Providence or Olneyville. Immigrants bring creativity and transferable skills. Their skills are foreign to American culture, requiring translation and transference. The diverse skills immigrants bring with them to this country could and should be used to revitalize the neighborhood, creating wealth while sustaining its soul. Our people are immigrant tailors, engineers, doctors and policeman from their country.

- We are creative people! We can help them reach their potential! When people come home at night, where do they go or what do they do to express their creativity? There is untapped potential in arts, dance and positive financial attitudes. There is a large number of teachable youth including a large number of voters...voting is instrumental in the building of a healthy community.
- Youth are our best natural resource. Youth can bring families together. Youth are our next leaders. Youth also have tremendous entrepreneurial potential. This potential needs harvesting to be developed. There's a lot of youth and programming – is it matched up? POSA, Youth programs, Schools, Parks.
- By and large Cranston Street is an edge street (depending on where you live).
- Understand neighborhoods within neighborhoods and how do they define their geography.
- The community is mix of low to middle-income. The urban fabric of West Elmwood has a higher than normal density in comparison to the rest of the city. Even though reported income levels are low, the high density creates purchasing power of 229%.
- A strong producing community development corporation in WEHDCO that buffers and integrates cultural differences.
- Six of the Cranston Street businesses in the central retail area are building owner occupied.
- Immigrant residents buy goods and services mostly with cash – no documents or paper trail. Immigrant residents invest cash in other residents to start businesses. Moreover, once underway and successful they are expected to invest in someone else. This approach is a non-American, non-European way of buying and selling. It is the by-product of immigrant culture. It is the Grameen bank way of micro lending where citizens invest in and support each other.

**What are the constraints surrounding the site: physical, legal, financial, or political? What are the concerns, blocks and barriers of the location?**

- People who live and work here feel safer than the perception might be from the outside looking in. To connect West Elmwood to the global, regional, State and City economy requires changing the external view of the neighborhood. If you know, what "outsiders" focus on then you can change it. People in the community must speak well of the safety that is present.

Residents require education on the actual safety and dangers of West Elmwood.

- Althea Street area in the 3<sup>rd</sup> segment is considered a “tough” area.
- There are two buses #31 traveling on Cranston Street. One goes up Union and the other up Cranston Street. There is traffic congestion. Some say, buses can’t use Cranston Street because they can’t make the turn in the road at Gonzalez Taxi (to be verified).
- Concern: developers will come in before the neighborhood is ready to shape the development and too much displacement will be the adverse result.
- In West End, there is lots of overlap in defining a “neighborhood.”
- One blockage is the ownership of Armory and its use: State vs. City.

### **What is in motion as an emerging condition that will impact the location?**

- DMV moving to Cranston, which will add traffic to Cranston St. Approach DMV for resources to help re-location mitigate impact. In the face of DMV moving to Cranston soon, there is a concern on the part of citizens that DOT will try to remove on-street parking on Cranston Street to get more cars moving and moving faster to get to the DMV. The adverse result: more cars faster and the loss of a retail shopping experience.
- 65 new units in development.
- A 24 – 30 unit townhouse project – home ownership.
- 36 units at Pearl Street. 40,000 square feet of warehouse (including Trinity). 36 rental units (many at 20% or less of Providence MSA income), 19 residential condos, 5 community condos (8,000 square feet), 4 are subsidized and many are at 100% median.
- West Elmwood Housing has a young adult employment model it wants to expand that uses lead hazard abatement as the program. Aim is not saving youth, but giving them an opportunity. It is a disciplined approach, e.g., learning to put money in the bank.
- In the neighborhood there’s a difference between displacement and gentrification and West Elmwood Housing Corporation is trying to define this moving target from the experiences of working with the people in the neighborhood.
- The city’s neighborhood markets program has \$50,000 for 8 neighborhoods to improve storefronts for the targeted neighborhoods of which Cranston Street is one.

### **What plans or projects are on the drawing board as an emerging condition?**

- Cranston Street is on DOT street improvement list; what can be done to move it up higher on the list? Can the relocation of DMV be used as a good case to move it up on the road improvement list?

- There is an emerging merchants association with very active, engaged leadership.
- We also need to help shop owners make storefronts more attractive, inviting, and brighter and not locked down with bars and barriers. City's neighborhood markets program analyzing where to invest in storefront improvement.
- There's a study for the next use of Loutitt.
- The beautiful metal building at Rau is slated for mixed use.
- Route 10 will be realigned at Cranston Street.

### **What Requires Research?**

- GIS data from Providence Plan for actual population and neighborhood profile.
- What are the plans for improving sidewalks, trees and lighting?
- Map of open space and parks. Where do people walk?
- Look at crime from two views. First, consult a police map: Where is crime actually located, e.g., in a three-block radius? In addition, let the community know the truth about crime location. Secondly, listen to the village network for anecdotal data and the stuff not reported. 2 things to do: engage police around statistics as well as what parts of the neighborhood design have an adverse and positive impact on crime and safety.
- Cultural dynamics: Understand the cultural conditions that influence the design of their built environment? Types of buildings from different cultures. 27 religious institutions exist in the neighborhood. For those who come just to Church, what would it take for the church leadership to engage more and create a deeper connection to the neighborhood?
- Building uses: A map that shows existing street sections and property-by-property uses? Frontage study of buildings to include parking, bones of the building, and frontage visibility of each store.
- Building restoration needs? What are the historic places including buildings of character? What sites are eligible for historical tax credits? Paying attention to both residential and commercial!
- Environmental assessment? Including a map of Brownfield sites. Track truck movements for new sources of pollution, where are they idling, slowed down and so forth. What can you do, using new rules, to reduce such truck pollution?
- DMV relocation to old Brewery and DOT traffic impact study: Transportation thru neighborhood and how that affects how people live? Current, normal and peak load of cars and busses. Longer term parking where?
- Local economy: Neighborhood entrepreneurial opportunities? Status of manufacturing facilities and where they are headed?
- Need basic info: Where are the markets?
- Political boundaries (ward, rep, etc.)? Organic politics (who's fighting, getting along, etc.)?
- Capabilities mapping of all organizations serving Cranston Street?

#### **IV. In the location, what are the potential solutions, opportunities, projects or value adds?**

- Develop design principles for the neighborhood based on the many cultures living there. Look at what Bristol, RI did to prevent national chains from altering the character of its village center by imposing tight design standards.
- Look at building types that produce equity. Look at buildings that could produce equity.
- Use 4 lots and 3 buildings, controlled either by WEHDC or its "friends", and pilot them as next generation Cranston Street buildings.

#### **V. To achieve the goals, what know-how, from which practitioners will be required? (Use multiple tiers to organize talent)**

- DOT and traffic engineers
- Retail marketing
- Infill and density

#### **V. Inside the labs at the Congress: what do we want new urbanists to help with the most?**

Help wanted by West Elmwood Housing and Community Development Corporation is with the first four priorities.

1. Overall, evolving the street as a city center: What has to be added to the area? What can be done to make it one of the gateways to Providence? Using proposed zoning changes: Make the area a pilot study for impact. Sharpen design principles so they are intercultural and make them specific for developers. Look at the pockets of culture in terms of how they live. A design style and design standards that's intercultural. The physical design: More densely built housing where? Can the 1 and 2 story buildings in the middle section of retail among the 3 and 4 story ones go up in height? What incentives for multi-story buildings? Infill the missing teeth, where and what kind?
2. How to spiff up the storefronts that hold the character of the place, including solving the grates over windows and iron pull-down doors?
3. Connect the Armory more clearly to the street? Put in a door on Cranston Street? Steps? Landscaping?
4. Traffic flows and patterns especially because of DMV's emerging presence in Cranston and its impact on Cranston Street traffic?
5. Brand and market the neighborhood as many cultures and culinary choices.

6. Animate the public realm: Where to ensure more walking, meeting places, people bumping into each other, etc.?

### **VII. What are the proposed study actions for the next 75 days?**

1. Form and convene a location-specific stakeholder group to dig deeper into developing this fact book.
2. Answer basic research questions.
3. Assemble critical maps and images.