

King County Children and Family Commission  
Irreducible Needs of Families in King County  
**Report from group discussion conducted with business owners in White  
Center District 8  
September 29, 2010**

**Group facilitator:** Nhan Nguyen, Neighborhood Revitalization Program Manager, and Peter Chum, Resident Leadership Fellow, White Center Community Development Association

**Host agency:** White Center Community Development Association

**Location of the focus group:** Uncle Mike's Barbecue, 9640 16<sup>th</sup> Ave SW, Seattle 98106

**Date:** Wednesday, Sept. 29, 2010      **Time :** 6:00-8:00 p.m.

**Number of People who attended** 7 Women 10 Men were local business owners, 5 team members of the Strength of Place Housing Village project, 4 White Center Community Development Association Neighborhood Revitalization Program staff or consultant, 2 family members. Supporting documentation came from attending the White Center Community Safety Coalition Meeting on September 23 that was attended by 8 men and 4 women who were local residents.

#### **Setting the Context for the Focus Group**



The Neighborhood Revitalization Program Manager has convened local small business owners around shared goals to revitalize the commercial district in White Center:

- To build strong relationships between businesses and community partners
- To build camaraderie, enthusiasm and mutual assistance among business owners
- To raise issues for discussion and work together to take action to address issues
- To bring resources to the table to support businesses
- To create a safe and better environment for all businesses

There is a monthly White Center Business District Mixer where the owners come together and over an evening meal have a chance to hear relevant information, discuss new or continuing issues, and identify topics for future discussion. The group discussion and information collection for the Irreducible Needs Project occurred at the September business mixer. The participants at the September Business Mixer were primarily English and Spanish speaking business owners. The Program Manager has done outreach to include Cambodian, Somali, and Latino businesses and continues to try to engage these small business owners.

## Introduction to the local businesses in White Center

There has been a recent growth of small businesses in the White Center business district in the last year including the 3.14 Bakery, Proletariat Pizza, Full Tilt ice cream and Uncle Mike's Barbecue. These new family oriented businesses in the commercial district are adding to the mix of other stores, shops, and services that have been in White Center for a range of years. The local businesses include franchises of chain stores or services as well as independent owners:

- 26 automotive related stores or services
- 18 retail shops (fashion, drug stores)
- 5 pubs
- 2 real estate offices
- 5 coffee houses
- 3 gas stations
- 28 restaurants, fast food, taco trucks
- 9 banks
- 6 insurance agencies
- 4 bakeries
- 16 beauty salons, barber shops
- 23 services (art, upholstery, tattoo, travel, tv repair, graphic artist)
- 5 medical, dental offices
- 16 grocery stores, markets, specialty food markets

In addition to the businesses listed there have been four entertainment related businesses, including a video rental store that closed in the past year and the Club Evolucion or Club Evo that is referred to below due to neighborhood safety concerns.

## Notes about the group participants

An overview of the King County Children and Family Commission and the Irreducible Needs Project were shared with the group. The needs that were identified by the Commission were stated: a safe neighborhood, adequate nutritious food, affordable wellness care, livable wage, access to education and learning through life, affordable housing, stable and secure relationships, and a culturally supportive network. The purpose of holding focus groups and the results of eliciting information on how families in King County were meeting their needs were also briefly highlighted to those in attendance. The business owners were asked to identify what needs they had for their own families and what they felt other families like theirs most needed for the children to thrive. The business owners were also asked what challenges they faced in running a business and what supports or resources would assist them as business owners and community members.

## Key Points emerging from the group

- The experienced business owners and the relatively new business owners similarly indicated that what concerns them about trying to run a business in the White Center neighborhood is the problem of public safety. There are several related issues: one is the presence of transients that drink publicly, annoy

customers, and sleep in doorways and alleys; another is the late night club that drew crowds that poured onto the street creating an atmosphere that it was not safe to be in White Center at night.

- As community members the business owners identified there are two main areas that are unmet needs for many families and these are: job opportunities that provide a sufficient income for adult family members and affordable housing . For their own families the business owners would like to have safe neighborhoods and they would like to see the quality of education improve for the children and youth in all families.

**1. From your perspective as a community member and business owner, what are the needs that you think most families have?**

Sufficient income- Most of the business owners felt that families do not have a sufficient income and if there were more employment opportunities so adults worked more hours a week and were paid a higher than minimum wage this would improve the living situations for many families. If more adults were employed and had spendable income then local business would also improve. The business owners described that their businesses are doing adequate business with customers but would like to see improvements in the number of customers on more days of the week and in having longer periods of busier workloads due to customer demand.

Affordable housing- The second area that the business owners felt was a community need was affordable housing that would keep families in the neighborhood and these families would be shoppers and users of White Center services.

Affordable health/wellness care- When they were asked what were the unmet needs of most families, this group of business owners indicated that after sufficient income and affordable housing the next highest area of unmet need was affordable health care. None of the business owners who were interviewed were able to provide an employer-paid health care benefit to any of their employees. One owner described that benefit as desirable but prohibitively expensive. In the four couples that have recently opened White Center businesses one of the partners in each business has continued to work at another job or has continued to have employer paid benefits from a previous job. This indicates that the employers have yet to be able to afford health care benefits through employment. The percent of White Center households targeted to have health benefits from employments in 2010 was 34%.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Making Connections Dashboard Mid year 2010 as of June 30, 2010



*New housing development that addresses the need for housing and for employment*

The business people identified two needs, affordable housing and jobs for local residents that are being addressed in the new Strength of Place Initiative (SOPI) Village housing project. This new housing project will build 30 apartments for low income families making less than about \$55,000 a year.<sup>2</sup> The project broke ground on September 15 and units are expected to be ready for occupancy in 2011. The units will include 1,2, and 3 bedroom units that are not typically found in most apartments but have been included with consideration of the larger families and extended families in White Center. Six of the units will be reserved for formerly homeless families. The SOPI Village is described as being a family-oriented living community near downtown White Center. The project is a collaboration of Capitol Hill Housing, Delridge Neighborhoods Development Association, and White Center Community Development Association. The project is being green built to the Evergreen Sustainable development standards.

As a community focused project, the aim is to hire local residents who are carpenters, painters, laborers, dry wall installers, and other skilled and semi-skilled workers. An employment manager was present at this business mixer meeting who assured the local business owners who included contractors that the on-site project employer intends to check the work histories of applicants to be sure appropriate workers are hired.

Additional supporting information from sources in White Center has identified that there have been several other recent efforts directed to increasing employment among White Center residents:

- In a related effort the White Center-Making Connections partnership is working to link White Center residents to job opportunities in construction and to help residents to retain their jobs.
- The White Center Community Development Association has endorsed a similar effort in the Got Green strategy that aims to identify job opportunities for low income workers, especially workers of color, to enter the new green economy in the field of weatherization that offers an accessible entry point to a living wage career pathway.
- Another effort had been to secure the Food Stamps and Employment Training Funds (FSET) that have served 2,450 White Center residents through a neighborhood jobs pipeline that increased communication among service providers to collaborate in serving families.

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<sup>2</sup> The 4 one bedroom units will rent at \$363-697, the 20 two bedroom units at \$415-917, and 6 three bedroom units at \$462-\$1028 depending on income.

**2. What is an area where you believe most White Center families are meeting their needs?**

The majority of the business owners believed that families in White Center do have adequate food or access to food through community resources. The White Center Food Bank has just received \$60,000 that will be allocated for a mobile food bank van to service two apartment complexes, Nia Apartments in Greenbridge and Arrowhead Gardens which offer affordable living for seniors or disabled people. This will be a mobile van that brings items for the residents’ selection so it differs from a delivery van that brings prepared meals or bags of food. The addition of the mobile food bank van expands the services that are being provided by the White Center Food Bank that include: a demonstration kitchen, locally grown produce, on-site interpreters, and a Healthy Food gift card for food bank clients to use in purchasing their choice of fruits and vegetables from local White Center markets.

A smaller number of the business owners felt that some families in White Center have established culturally specific social support networks that are a strength or a resource for them. Some of these business owners acknowledged the cultural diversity in White Center, that is evident among the Mexican-American, Salvadoran, Vietnamese, Khmer, Thai, Chinese, Somali, and English speaking businesses or services.

**3. What are the needs that you have for your own families?**

*Safe neighborhoods-* The business owners indicated that they would like to have safe neighborhoods for their own families and the second most frequently identified need was to have access to high quality education for all family members. In terms of safe neighborhoods, those who were attending the business mixer briefly mentioned that being free of drug related activity and free of violence were certainly conditions that would contribute to safe neighborhoods. In 2009 there were 209 burglaries in White Center and that is slightly less than the 234 burglaries that occurred in the West Hill neighborhood in Renton/Skyway.

Two business owners also briefly indicated that there is evidence of vandalism in the graffiti that appears on store walls. There was further evidence of vandalism that caused the closure of the recently opened pedestrian corridor on SW 98<sup>th</sup> Street that linked the Greenbridge community to the business district. Vandals had knocked out the lights along the corridor and removed the stainless steel railing that made the area unsafe for walking. The corridor had been developed as a result of study which had found that people who live in walkable communities are healthier.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The study was a Land Use, Transportation, Air Quality and Health Study and the corridor was completed with the cooperation of the King County Department of Natural Resources and Parks, King County Road

Additional information about what local residents identified as risks to their safety were heard at the September meeting of the White Center Community Safety Coalition. At that community meeting a couple who attended requested assistance from members of the safety coalition to engage the police or drug enforcement agencies to reduce or remove what the couple perceived to be drug related activity occurring on their block just east of 16<sup>th</sup> Ave S.W. There were local participants present at the Safety Coalition meeting who had experience in trying to rid their blocks of what they had believed to be drug related activity exhibited by their neighbors. The advice provided to the concerned local residents was to make note of the activity and to provide that specific information to the local sheriff as well as to report the nuisance of having abandoned vehicles on the observed property.

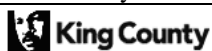
Interest to improve education - In regard to the second need area that was high quality education, several business owners think attention is needed in the elementary, middle school, and high school to ensure that students are receiving quality instruction and engaging in learning. Several owners felt that the schools are not adequately preparing students to enter the work force so they are not ready to do simple skills of beginning workers. The business owners identified that improving education for older students was their concern but White Center has been the site of a 10-year Early Learning Initiative strategy launched by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Thrive by Five Washington in 2006. The strategy has aimed to develop an in-depth, community wide early learning demonstration site, engage the statewide system that supports early learning, and implement promising practices in early learning. The investment and public-private partnership is expected to assure universal access to early care and education and increase smooth transitions to elementary school.

In the baseline evaluation of the status of early learning in White Center that was conducted by Mathematica Policy Research in 2008, the levels of coordination and communication among White Center early learning service providers were found to be low and there were few full-day, full-year preschool spaces. With the development and implementation of Early Care and Education HUB in White Center, the development of outreach services such as the Open Arms Doula Services, and the provision of the Nurse Family Partnership one long term outcome is that students who receive early learning and quality early childhood education will have improved outcomes when they attend school. There are several relevant results from the Making Connections White Center indicator mid-year report as of June 30, 2010:

- The number of children having preschool experience increased from 275 in 2007-08 to 457 in 2008-09.

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Services, King County Housing Development Authority, 4 Culture, Feet First and the White Center Community Development Association.



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- The percent of children who were proficient in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reading was steady at 58% in 2007-08 and in 2008-09. The Family Connections approach will aim to assess and measure family economic success and improved third grade reading for a cohort of families.

**4. As local business owners, what are the concerns or issues that you encounter in doing business in White Center?**

The business owners identified that one of their major concerns is the risk to public safety from the chronically inebriated transients in the business district. The business owners who attended the business mixers held earlier this year have identified this to be an ongoing problem so a primary concern for neighborhood safety is to reduce public intoxication. The risks stem from the transients' actions, their assertive panhandling, sleeping in doorways, using restaurant bathrooms available for customers, urinating in public, and bedding down in the alley where restaurant or shop employees park their cars. The presence of the transients can deter customers and the owners are concerned that they and their employees may be panhandled or mugged by the transients. The owners who responded to questions, during this meeting, indicated that they were not overly worried or fearful but rather that they were simply concerned that it was not pleasant for employees to have to avoid the transients. The business owners said that typically the transients or street people have not been offensive to customers who are in the stores but the transients will panhandle pedestrians on 16<sup>th</sup> Ave SW. The owners said that generally the transients will leave the premises when asked to do so.

The White Center business owners and the White Center Community Safety Coalition had separate meetings but discussed the same topic which is the growing presence of chronic inebriates. The business owners heard that several conditions have led to the street people and public drinking. One grocery store sells a 24 ounce can of fortified alcohol that is equal to drinking five cans of beer. The low cost of the fortified alcohol at less than one dollar leads to the transients purchasing a can and being drunk on the street. Their behavior of urinating and defecating in public spaces has been a topic of discussion at the White Center Community Safety Coalition Meeting. The individuals attending the Safety Coalition meeting took action to send public comments that would be taken into consideration when the grocery store license to sell beer came up for renewal. By submitting public comments the members of the Safety Coalition hoped to prevent the store from being able to continue to sell the fortified cheap alcohol that would eliminate the source from the neighborhood. If they are successful they would be increasing the level of safety for local residents and customers on 15<sup>th</sup> Avenue SW. Business owners at the business mixer as well as the White Center Chamber of Commerce and members of the White Center Community Safety Coalition all discussed taking action through working with local law enforcement to develop a good neighbor agreement. Business owners are asked to sign the good neighbor agreement indicating they agree not to sell single cans to intoxicated individuals. The good neighbor agreement is expected to

decrease public intoxication if the supply is gone then the transients might move to another location.

The business owners also expressed some concern at the undesirable activity surrounding the presence of Club Evolucion or Club Evo just south of Roxbury on 16<sup>th</sup> SW. This was also a topic that has been discussed at the White Center Community Safety Coalition meetings where the participants described that the club has attracted under age girls, older men, and suspected gang members. The activity usually spills out to the street in front of the club and to many cruising cars which gives a reputation that the block is not safe at night. The Safety Coalition members understood that the license of the club may not be removed so it would not remain a nuisance but that was not yet confirmed. Most business owners conduct business earlier in the day and evening so the club goers that arrive at 10:00 p.m. or later do not interact directly with local store customers. The business owners had discussed at a previous meeting that there prostitutes in the neighborhood and they would like to see an increased police presence to decrease this illegal activity.

##### **5. What resource or support would help you as local business people?**

The business owners have identified that they would like to have a timely response and presence from the King County sheriff when any safety risks or concerns for personal safety occur or when a transient and an employee, local resident, or customer interact negatively. The owners referred to having no sheriff patrolling the area due to a change in assignment and they would like to see that officer replaced. The owners also would prefer to see that fewer transients were in the neighborhood and that their access to low cost alcohol could be curbed. The owners would like to see that the transients' offensive behavior was not so obvious and intrusive on potential customers, families, and residents who might like to walk and shop in the neighborhood.

The local business owners had previously talked about other concerns that can affect their business including the lack of parking on the street. They have looked into parking their own cars away from the business district to encourage customer parking. The owners would also like to see improved lighting to encourage shoppers to be in the business district in the evening. One owner described a drop off in his customer traffic as soon as it is dark so he supports having improved lighting. Several of the local business owners have also maintained flower planters to improve the appearance of the local storefronts. There was some minor vandalism of the planters so the owners had to restore them in the interest of keeping up appearances. There was a very high response in the Spring when 400 volunteers helped with the Spring Clean so there is encouraging signs of local residents' interest and energy in improving the White Center neighborhood.