

INVEST NORTH HILLS: Meeting Minutes

Focus Group #2 – Neighborhood Architectural Character & Community Assets/History

April 18, 2015 (Saturday) 9:30 AM to 12:30 PM

North Hills Manor Community Room, 300 Linden Avenue, North Hills, PA

Planning/Design Team Members in Attendance:

Kyle Speece (Pennrose Properties)

Kyla Bayer and Val Yancey (MCHA)

Garlen Capita, Jaquelin Camp, and Mary Morton (WRT)

Community Participants: 22 Neighbors/Community and Manor Residents were in Attendance

The following is a summary of what was presented and discussed in Focus Group Meeting #2 on Saturday, April 18, 2015. Please refer to “Focus Group #2: Participant Work Product” (separate file) for corresponding information.

I. Welcome.

- a. The facilitator greeted participants and outlined the purpose of the focus groups as well as oriented participants as to survey findings and Advisory Committee efforts to date.
- b. This session will address architectural character, physical form and the site placement options for the new North Hills Manor units.
- c. The Development Team sent out a survey in December 2014 to the neighbors and residents of the Manor. The Team then met with the Invest North Hills Advisory Committee to discuss survey results and, with the Committee’s input, developed three (3) focus group sessions.
 - o Session 1: Neighborhood Quality of Life (Thursday, April 16th 6:30pm – 9:00pm)
 - o Session 2: Neighborhood Architectural Character & Community Assets / Community History (Saturday, April 18th 9:30 am-12:30 pm)
 - o Session 3: North Hills Manor Unit Design (Interior) and Resident Quality of Life (Thursday, May 28th 6:30 pm - 8:30 pm, open to Manor residents only)
- d. The facilitator presented an overview of the survey results.
 - o The survey asked for the community’s thoughts on a host of issues including: housing quality, community assets, quality of life, interaction with neighbors, and North Hills Manor.
 - o Approximately 400 surveys were distributed. The development team received 97 responses (28% response rate) to the Neighbor Survey and 16 responses (40% response rate) to the Manor Resident Survey. Responses indicated the following:
 - Many long term residents, almost 60% of respondents have lived in the neighborhood over 20 years.
 - There are more families with youth between 11-18 years old living in North Hills Manor, compared with the neighborhood households which had more adults (25-64 years old) and senior (65+) households.

- Over 80% of respondents thought that North Hills has a very strong sense of community; residents want to stay. This is a point of pride. The majority of respondents say they know their neighbors and 77% of Manor respondents and 87% of neighborhood respondents believe that North Hills is a place that they would like to live in the future.
 - The majority of those surveyed (80 %+) would be interested in joining a North Hills Neighborhood Association focused on efforts to improve the community.
 - Open space, community connections, location, public transit, good schools and the family nature of the community are all seen as positives.
 - The community center, baseball fields playground, pool, open space were viewed as community assets.
 - Most felt neighborhood amenities are in fair to good condition. The survey showed limited visitorship at some of the neighborhood facilities, with more frequent visits to the North Hills Community Center, Upper Dublin Community Pool and Evelyn B Wright Park by Manor residents compared to neighborhood residents. Many neighborhood residents reported that they had not visited those facilities at all in the last year or visited less than 3 times in the last year.
 - Although some respondents mentioned safety concerns around traffic and drugs, most respondents reported that they feel very safe in the neighborhood both during the day and at night.
- You can view the complete survey results and other information on the website. <http://www.investnorthhills.org/2015/03/12/surveys/>

e. Questions/Comments?

Q. What does redevelopment mean? Tearing it down?

A. Yes, the Montgomery County Housing Authority has made the decision that these buildings are obsolete and need to be torn down and replaced, but a new plan has not yet been developed for the site. MCHA and the development team are looking for your input before creating a site plan.

II. Overview of Focus Group Exercises

The Development Team outlined the exercise and goals of today's session.

- a. We are going to break up into two groups to have smaller conversations about opportunities for redeveloping the site. We will be looking at where we should replace Manor housing units, where would community amenities be placed and what should those units look like.
- b. We are interested in your opinions on unit types, architectural styles and site options. You'll have the opportunity to tell us what you like and dislike. We want to get a feel for how you envision your neighborhood. What do you want your neighborhood to look like?
- c. Rules for participation: We need to be respectful and have a productive dialogue where everyone is heard.

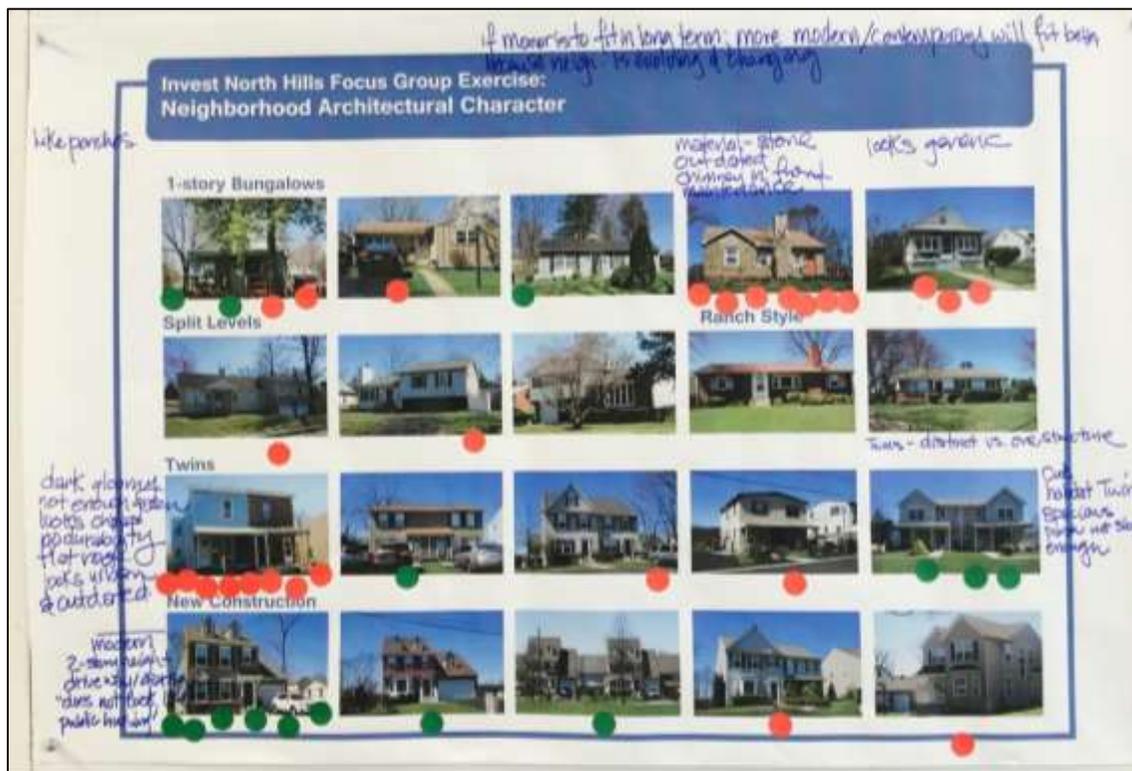
III. Exercise 1: Visual Preference Survey – Existing Neighborhood Architectural Character

The groups were given the following instructions:

When we look at the architectural character of the neighborhood it is quite varied, from one-story ranch-style homes to small older bungalows. There are some twins and some two story colonial style homes. Architectural features include front porches, attached and detached garages, and materials ranging from wood to vinyl siding, brick and stone. There is an opportunity while redeveloping the Manor to better integrate the units within the character of the neighborhood.

For the first exercise, this board shows images of existing homes in the neighborhood. You can use your dots (green to show things you really like and red for things that you dislike). We will then regroup and discuss the responses.

The below image is a snapshot of the completed work product. A summary of the group’s findings is as follows:



1. Overall there was a strong preference for twins and porches
 - Some preferred when twins look like two distinct, separate structures vs. one structure
 - Others expressed that a preference for modern, contemporary buildings that they feel will fit in better with a changing and evolving neighborhood.

2. Comments on specific images above are as follows:
 - Twin Existing (3rd row, 1st photo) - DISLIKED
 - Not enough green space; looks cheap and drab; roof is flat; style looks urban and seems outdated.

- Bungalow (1st row, 4th photo) - DISLIKED
 - Stone front gives it an outdated overall look; dislike chimney in the front; would require too much maintenance.
- Bungalow (1st row, 5th photo) – DISLIKED
 - “Generic” look.
- New Construction (4th row, 1st photo) – LIKED
 - Modern look; garage and driveway are nice; good height at 3 stories; doesn’t look like public housing; dormers with windows in the attic; lots of windows on the front façade.
- Twin (3rd row, 5th photo)
 - Built by Habitat for Humanity, nice front yard and porch; problem – roof doesn’t slope enough.

IV. Exercise 2: Visual Preference Survey – Sample Housing Types

The groups were given the following directions:

For the second exercise, this board shows images of projects that Pennrose has built and WRT has designed in other communities. These are not designs that will be built in North Hills but we are using these images so that we can get a sense of what you like or dislike about the architecture. You can use your dots (green to show things you like and red for things that you dislike). We will then regroup and discuss.

The below image is a snapshot of the completed work product. A summary of the group’s findings is as follows:



1. Overall there was a strong preference for site planning and architectural which reflected a suburban almost semi-rural feel.
2. Comments on specific images above are as follows:
 - Fairgrounds (Chester Township, PA) (2nd row, first photo)– Twins – LIKE
 - Sidewalks and nice landscaping; light, pleasing colors; siding; pillars on the porch.
 - Fairgrounds (Chester Township, PA) (Top left photo in middle of page)– Townhomes – DISLIKE
 - Too urban, too city – you’re in the suburbs, you need space. Too close together, not enough space.
 - Obery Court (Annapolis, MD) (Upper right corner photo) – Townhomes – DISLIKE
 - Looks like a doll house, doesn’t fit the character of the North Hills neighborhood.
 - Overlook Park (Allentown, PA) (Bottom row, 3rd photo) – Twins – LIKE
 - Curved street is a nice feature; twins; looks spacious; you can see the gaps between the houses. Larger setback from the road.
3. Additional Architectural Elements.
 - Siding vs. Brick? – 11 preferred siding (less durable, but more variety of color, looks new), 5 prefer brick (more expensive, durable). Some prefer a mix of brick and siding.
 - Signage. Participants questioned whether there will be a development sign for the Manor and whether if it would say MCHA. The majority of people preferred not having a sign. A few people felt that having a sign makes it clear to people that they cannot loiter. Others responded that if the new development blends in with the rest of the neighborhood, people will not loiter, as currently loitering does not occur on individual properties.

V. Exercise 3: “Be a Planner- Redevelop North Hills Manor”

For the third exercise, the participants were divided into two similar size groups, comprising of both neighbors and Manor residents. Participants were given scaled cutouts of building and site pieces (townhomes, twins, parks and open space features). The focus group participants had an opportunity to discuss with their group and plan the redevelopment of the North Hills Manor using the scaled plan pieces.

The two groups were given the following directions:

- *You are being asked to design (3) three site plans for the redevelopment of North Hills Manor. Each site plan must contain 50 units and be designed within the following boundaries:*
 1. *Opportunity A: Redevelop North Hills Manor using only the existing Manor site.*
 2. *Opportunity B: Redevelop North Hills Manor using the existing Manor site, the Evelyn B. Wright Park and the Upper Dublin Community Pool sites.*

3. Opportunity C: Redevelop North Hills Manor using the existing Manor site, the Evelyn B. Wright Park, the Upper Dublin Community Pool and the North Hills Community Center sites.

- You will have 40 minutes to work with your group and develop site concepts using the pieces provided. The facilitator will describe each of the pieces and how to read the map.
- Groups can decide if they would like to use townhome layouts or twins or a combination of both as long as the entire 50 units are used. All the other pieces representing parks and open space amenities will be to the discretion of the group.
- Identify a spokesperson for your group to present your concept at the end of the exercise. Before taping down your pieces discuss and note the pros and cons. When we re-group, the team spokesperson will present the proposals to the entire group.

The resulting layouts can be seen on the board images within the “Focus Group #2 Participant Work Product” (separate file). A summary of each group’s findings are as follows:

Opportunity	Group 1:	Group 2:
Opportunity A: Redevelop North Hills Manor using only the existing Manor site.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group 1’s first concept placed 36 twins on the site • While the group liked the layout of twins with shared parking and shared open spaces/picnic areas, they were not able to accommodate the total required 50 replacement units and therefore did not think this was a viable redevelopment option 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group 2’s first concept redeveloped the site with a mixture of twins and townhomes • While townhomes provided the flexibility to fit in all required 50 units in addition to a small shared open space and Manor Community Center, overall the group did not believe this was a viable option as the site was cramped.
Opportunity B: Redevelop North Hills Manor using the existing Manor site, the Evelyn B. Wright Park and the Upper Dublin Community Pool sites	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group 1’s second concept used all three sites and included 50 twins on the sites and provided a community park with a range of amenities as well as a number of shared open spaces • This option got a lot of support from both groups (during the regroup) because: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ it used twins which are the preferred housing type among participants; ▪ incorporated community amenities and 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group 2’s second concept showed used the existing Manor site and the Park, but kept the existing Upper Dublin Community Pool. The plan included 50 twins and added a smaller park adjacent to the pool as well as a neighborhood park on Chelsea and Walnut • The majority of participants during the regroup did not like this option. Overall the comments were that this plan was disjointed and was not efficient use of space

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ spread the units out so it didn't feel tight and constrained. • Some participants thought that by bringing the community park and pool into one space in the middle of the community it made for a better and more efficient use of space. • There was a concern that the scale of the pool showed in the reuse option was much smaller than the existing Upper Dublin Community Pool. 	
<p>Opportunity C: <i>Redevelop North Hills Manor using the existing Manor site, the Evelyn B. Wright Park, the Upper Dublin Community Pool and the North Hills Community Center sites.</i></p>	<p>Each group achieved consensus that they wanted the Community Center to remain. Accordingly, neither group considered an option that would impact the North Hills Community Center. Many cited the historic nature of the building and the current programs as the reasons for not disturbing the site. There was significant support for improving and rehabbing the Community Center with modernization and an addition.</p>	

VI. Questions & Answers.

Below is a summary of participant questions that arose during the Q&A portion of the focus group.

Q. Who keeps the grounds, who will perform overall site maintenance?

A. Generally Pennrose will take care of common areas with maintenance crews.

Q: How/when will the relocation issues be addressed?

A: At the appropriate time, relocation specifics will be presented to Manor residents in accordance with federal regulations.

VII. Additional Discussion.

- Defensible Space Planning. Concern about crime and security arose as it related to site planning. The development team explained that designing defensible spaces is an important part of site planning. An example was discussed about the difference between North Hills Manor and Crest Manor's current site plan and it was conveyed by the MCHA that the Crest Manor has a lower number of security/safety/loitering related incidents. Many participants were in favor of a site plan which captured the defensible space features of the Crest Manor site in an effort to reduce security related incidents.

- North Hill Community Center. Over all consensus was achieved that the group did not want to use the Community Center site for Manor housing. Through that discussion participants voiced the following with respect to the Center.
 - There are a lot of activities still taking place at the Community Center – Abington Health Clinic, Daycare, Afterschool, and Food Cupboard.
 - North Hills Manor Park and Community Center should remain where it is with opportunities for improving the site.
 - Can the historic façade of the building be kept and the building renovated?
 - Are there funds for improving the building?
 - The community needs to move forward on putting a historical marker on the Community Center

- Upper Dublin Community Pool. Many participants, felt that having a community pool is important. However, most did not feel that the existing pool needed to be preserved, only that they wished that a pool would remain in the neighborhood. The following discussion arose.
 - The pool is an important community amenity.
 - An indoor pool would provide more use. Right now the pool is only used a few months out of the year.
 - If the pool was removed, what would be replaced? Will it be a comparable amenity?
 - A replacement of the pool should be similar or equal in size, not smaller.
 - The design of the current pool is not optimal as it doesn't allow for laps or swim classes effectively.

VIII. Wrap Up.

Thank you for coming. We appreciate your input! Your input here will help inform the development team as it begins to draft site plan options. Once options have been drafted, we will return to the community for feedback.

-END-