



# Group has detailed plan to improve lower east-side Detroit neighborhood

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Call it the great LEAP forward for Detroit's lower east side.

Over the last year, community activists struggling to revitalize their neighborhoods have engaged in a block-by-block, almost house-by-house, planning project, surveying thousands of residents and engaging teams of **experts** in architecture, planning, demographics and other disciplines.

Known as the Lower Eastside Action Plan, or LEAP, the effort has developed a set of initial recommendations pegged to a given block's condition, said Khalil Ligon, LEAP project manager.

In LEAP's vision, stronger districts may remain a mix of residential and commercial, while more vacant areas could be converted to urban farming or other nature-scapes.

Having produced initial recommendations,

members of the LEAP team of volunteers now hope to have their work adopted by the City of Detroit as part of whatever plan emerges from Mayor Dave Bing's broader, citywide Detroit Works effort.

"What we're hoping now is that we can have more detailed discussions about how we can begin to integrate LEAP into the larger city plan," Ligon said.

Marja Winters, Bing's deputy director of planning and development and a **leader** of the Detroit Works project, said the city appreciates what LEAP has done.

"I like the fact that they have engaged residents, given them a voice in deciding the future recommendations for their community," Winters said. "We appreciate neighborhoods taking ownership, thinking about solutions."

She added, "How do we bring that to the table and incorporate that in the (Detroit Works) process? I think it will definitely get addressed there, but right now, I can't

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exactly say how."

The LEAP project grew out of a desire of three nonprofit community groups -- Warren-Conner Development Coalition, Jefferson East Business Association and Genesis HOPE Community Development -- to find new uses for rapidly expanding vacant land on the east side. The LEAP project area now has a population of about 39,000, down from more than 60,000 in 2000.

"Of course, everybody wants a traditional residential neighborhood, but the reality is, that's not going to happen," Ligon said. "Our population went from 60-plus thousand to 30-plus thousand in 10 years. So we've been on a continuing decline."

Maggie DeSantis, president of the Warren-Conner Development Coalition, said, "Everybody else seems to want to abandon it. Do we just walk away or do we get our arms around it and get ahead of it?"

Over the last several months, LEAP volunteers have surveyed thousands of east-side residents at community meetings and in door-to-door campaigns. Dozens were invited to meetings to pore over neighborhood maps and suggest what type of future uses might be appropriate.

With about \$300,000 in **funding** from the Erb Foundation and other backers, the LEAP team worked with several outside experts -- landscape architects from Ann Arbor-based JJR, demographers from Data Driven Detroit, legal help from Community Legal Resources and more -- to help guide

the discussions.

Among the ideas being considered for the area's most vacant expanses are storm water retention ponds, reforestation, urban farms, wineries and green zones, as well as using decommissioned schools as food processing plants.

Those are merely concepts now, but DeSantis said the LEAP project hopes for solid plans to emerge, not just fanciful ideas.

"We don't want pretty pictures," she said. "We want a set of strategies that work."

The LEAP meetings were running roughly parallel with Detroit Works public sessions, and LEAP volunteers said they hope that their more fine-grained study of the east side can become part of the city's broader, and more high-level, plans for Detroit.

"You're actually talking to the neighbors and you're talking to the people that live in the community," said Ayana Rhodes-Ako,

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