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The Uptown Consortium, Inc. In Cincinnati

By Beth Robinson, CEcD

LEVERAGING ANCHOR INSTITUTIONS TO STRENGTHEN NEIGHBORHOODS

The Uptown Consortium is a non-profit community development corporation dedicated to building strong public-private neighborhood partnerships to restore and revitalize the five urban neighborhoods that comprise Uptown Cincinnati. The Consortium's members are the five largest employers in the area and employ nearly 50,000 people, have a payroll of \$1.4 billion, and produce an annual economic impact of over \$3 billion. UCI's areas of focus are public safety, transportation, housing, and community and economic development.

The Uptown Consortium received the IEDC Gold Award for Neighborhood Development in 2013.

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CONSORTIUM, INC. IN CINCINNATI

By Beth Robinson, CEcD

The Uptown Consortium has been leading the effort to revitalize Uptown Cincinnati for the past decade. It is a private nonprofit organization comprised of five member institutions: Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden, UC Health, Tri-Health, and the University of Cincinnati. Through the Consortium, these anchor institutions have strategically leveraged their financial and human capital to improve the Uptown community.

Uptown Cincinnati is an economic engine for the entire Cincinnati region. It is the dominant center for healthcare and learning, characterized by a high concentration of research capabilities and talent. Over 55,000 people work in Uptown, making it the second largest employment center in the region behind downtown Cincinnati. Geographically, the area is strategically located just outside the downtown central business district, serving as a gateway to the city's residentially oriented neighborhoods and along the city's major transportation corridors.

Despite these significant assets, Uptown's neighborhoods suffer from a disproportionate share of the social issues affecting the city of Cincinnati. Issues related to crime, housing, social needs, and community and economic development affect the

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Group Health Medical Office Building.

quality of life in the community. Nearly 30 percent of the population reports incomes at or below the poverty line. At 21 percent, homeownership is much lower than the city's homeownership rate of 39 percent and the national average of over 65 percent. Unemployment at 17 percent is over three times higher than the city's average.

These social and economic conditions led to the creation of the Consortium in 2004. For the past ten years, it has been working to reinvest in the neighborhoods surrounding the campuses of the anchor institutions. The Consortium's work affects the 50,000 residents of Uptown Cincinnati in addition to the 55,000 people who work at the member institutions, and over 1.4 million visitors who travel to Uptown annually to visit the Cincinnati Zoo.

These investments have created and retained an estimated 3,300 jobs, nearly 400,000 square feet of office

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LEVERAGING ANCHOR INSTITUTIONS TO STRENGTHEN NEIGHBORHOODS

The Uptown Consortium is a non-profit community development corporation dedicated to building strong public-private neighborhood partnerships to restore and revitalize the five urban neighborhoods that comprise Uptown Cincinnati. The Consortium's members are the five largest employers in the area and employ nearly 50,000 people, have a payroll of \$1.4 billion, and produce an annual economic impact of over \$3 billion. UCI's areas of focus are public safety, transportation, housing, and community and economic development. The Uptown Consortium received the IEDC Gold Award for Neighborhood Development in 2013.

and retail space, and over 500 residential units. The foundation of the organization's work is strong public-private partnerships to support a multifaceted approach that includes the following objectives:

- **Promote Uptown neighborhoods** as vibrant communities where people of diverse economic and cultural backgrounds live, work, learn, and play through marketing and communications initiatives.
- **Support economic development** through integrated strategies that support the growth and vitality of the business community, create and retain jobs, and create a welcoming place to do business.
- **Promote community development** efforts by building partnerships with neighborhood stakeholders and leveraging Uptown's many assets including diverse and interesting neighborhoods, students, and home to the city's major employers.
- **Ensure Uptown is a safe, attractive, and walkable** community for its residents, employees, students, and visitors.
- **Create a clear sense of direction, distinct place,** and better access to neighborhoods, retail centers, and major institutions.

ORGANIZATION

The CEOs of Uptown's largest employers officially formed the Consortium in 2004. These leaders comprise the Board of Directors and provide leadership and guidance in establishing and implementing the organization's mission. Since its inception, the organization has been committed to working with the community in realizing the shared goal of a better Uptown.

At its formation, the Consortium initiated an intensive community outreach process that involved more than 40 individual and group sessions with over 300 key community, civic, and institutional leaders. The Uptown Cincinnati Strategic Opportunity Plan, prepared by the Consortium in December 2004, brought together all the diverse elements of these efforts.

The organization has continued to meet formally and informally with a wide range of residents, community councils, business owners, developers, and other leaders to inform and be informed. Formal input from community partners is now influenced by several advisory bodies: Community Development Committee, Public Safety Committee, and the Management Operations Committee (among others).

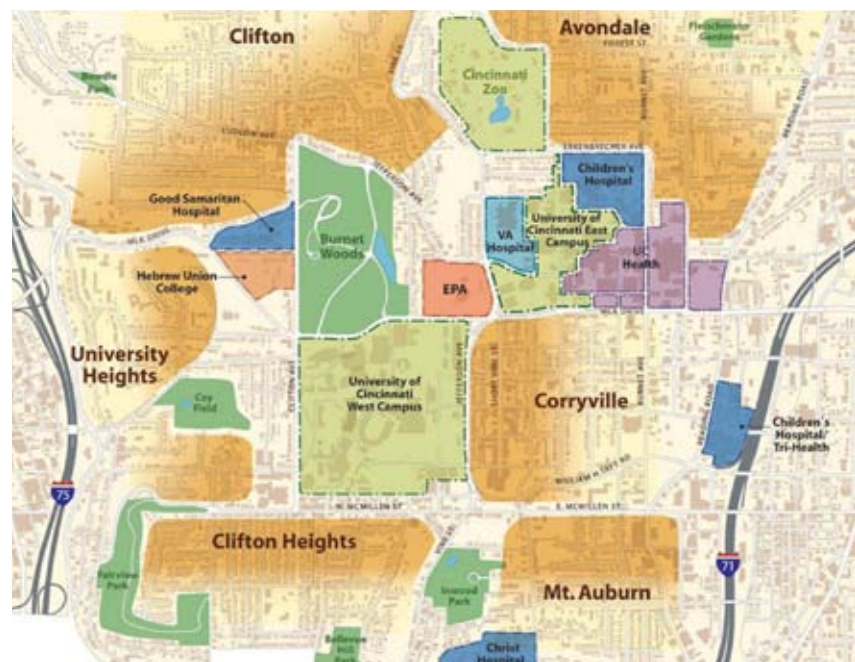
The Consortium was created to direct its members' investments in the Uptown community and serve as a conduit between the institutions and surrounding communities. The organization is led by a Board of Directors composed of the presidents and chief executive officers of the five member institutions. The support and commitment of the member executives are critical to success and sustainability.

The Management Operations Committee, a second tier committee comprised of high ranking staff from member organizations and two neighborhood representatives, contributes thoughts and ideas toward policy making and programs. The five professional staff, led by the president and CEO, implement the policies and programs formulated by the Board and Management Operations Committee while providing input into the policy-setting process. Policies and priorities are established with active community involvement and input through various committees and outreach. Public meetings, summits, design seminars, and other events have been used to solicit community input and communication.

Financial support is provided by annual operating grants from the member institutions as well as project fee income. Real estate development activities were initially capitalized by a \$36 million investment from the member organizations. The Consortium has also been successful in obtaining over \$7 million in funding from the city of Cincinnati and the Ohio Housing Finance Agency for various projects and initiatives.

AREAS OF FOCUS

Catalytic and comprehensive neighborhood development distinguishes the organization's unique work. Since its inception nearly ten years ago, the Consortium has invested over \$120 million through direct investments and federal New Markets Tax Credits, inducing over \$1 billion in development throughout Uptown. As stated earlier, the organization's investments have created and retained an estimated 3,300 jobs, and produced nearly 400,000 square feet of office and retail space and over 500 residential units. Following are highlights of project investments and results in the areas of community development and economic development, transportation and planning, and safety.



Uptown Area Map.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Avondale

The Consortium, in cooperation with the Burnet Avenue Revitalization Team – a business/resident partnership – launched a \$100 million project to bring life back to an 11-square-block area surrounding Burnet Avenue in the Avondale neighborhood. The project features: nearly 200,000 square feet of office space for the *Cincinnati Herald* and Cincinnati Children's medical office building, and multilevel parking garage; Burnet Place, a 62-unit rehab housing complex also offering 6,800 square feet of street-level commercial space; and Forest Square, a 21-unit senior housing complex.

The corridor was once crime ridden with the distinction of being one of the city's crime hotspots. It is now one of the city's safest corridors, assisted by the Consortium's annual support for off duty police officers and investment in surveillance cameras. Over 60 blighted properties were acquired and either demolished or redeveloped through the organization's efforts.

Corryville

Working closely with community stakeholders, the organization developed a plan to revitalize the Short Vine Business District. This once thriving commercial area in the Corryville neighborhood had been declining for the past 25 years and was characterized by vacant and dilapidated properties and criminal activity.



Views on Vine.

The Consortium has invested \$60 million in federal New Markets Tax Credits and direct investments to help turn around the street. These projects have included the construction of a 132-room Hampton Inn hotel and a 210-space public parking garage; the Views on Vine, a mixed-use project with 102 apartments and 180,000 square feet of retail space; and the acquisition of and investment in a portfolio of commercial properties. Today, the Short Vine Business District is on its way back as an

U SQUARE @ THE LOOP

The Uptown Consortium provided \$24 million in New Markets Tax Credits to help fill the final financing gap for a LEED certified mixed-use project covering two city blocks between McMillan and Calhoun streets within the Clifton Heights neighborhood across from the University of Cincinnati's campus. U Square at the Loop is comprised of 161 apartments, 80,000 square feet of retail space, 40,000 square feet of office space, and two 358-space parking garages. U Square was completed in August of 2013 at a cost of \$70 million.

The genesis of the project began with the 2001 Clifton Heights/UC Joint

Urban Renewal Plan which identified the area for redevelopment. The Clifton Heights Business Association, the Clifton Heights – University Heights – Fairview (CUF) Neighborhood Association, and the university then established the Clifton Heights Community Urban Redevelopment Corporation (CHCUTC), a nonprofit group charged with implementing the plan.

The project stalled for several years. The development group Towne Properties was ultimately selected in 2008 to refine the plan and create the complex funding strategy necessary for successful implementation. Allocations from three New Markets Tax Credits

allocates were secured to help finance the project, including the Cincinnati Development Fund, PNC Community Development Entity (CDE), and the Uptown Consortium, in addition to private equity

and tax increment financing and tax abatements from the city of Cincinnati.

The project has brought new life and vitality to an area that was once in decline and characterized by fast food restaurants and blighted buildings. Today over 20 dining and apparel retailers are located at U Square, complementing the adjacent neighborhood business district filled with locally owned, unique dining venues.

The road to success was long, however, and tested the endurance and commitment of its supporters. In the more than 10 years it has taken to plan and execute the project, the Consortium and its partners have overcome land acquisition battles, failed attempts by the first developer selected and, most recently, the economic downturn. Ultimately, collaboration among many community partners was necessary in order to bring this long planned development to fruition.



arts and entertainment district with increased demand for retail space and over \$25 million in private investments underway or completed in the past two years.

Clifton Heights

The Consortium invested \$24 million in federal New Markets Tax Credits to help finance the construction of U Square at the Loop, a catalytic mixed-use project in Clifton Heights including 80,000 square feet of retail, 40,000 square feet of office, and 161 apartments. This project anchors the south side of Uptown Cincinnati, returning long vacant land to productive reuse, revitalizing the local retail market, and creating approximately 480 permanent job opportunities and 130 full time equivalent jobs during construction.

Clifton

The organization helped finance a new facility in the Clifton neighborhood for Group Health Associates, a full-service medical center providing patient access to primary care doctors and specialists. This project is important because it ensures that Group Health Associates remains in the community long-term, preserving the availability of medical services in the urban core and resulting in the retention and expansion of approximately 200 jobs. The project will also help to attract higher income residents to live and work in the urban core.

A program was recently launched to lay the groundwork for revitalizing the Ludlow Avenue Business District. In partnership with community stakeholders, a retail leasing consultant has been hired to work with property owners and residents to develop a blueprint for identifying tenant prospects and district branding.

Green Energy

An allocation of New Markets Tax Credits (\$4 million) was provided to help finance a pioneering green energy project at the Cincinnati Zoo. In 2011, the largest publicly accessible solar array in the country was installed over a 700-car surface parking lot at the zoo. This project powerfully demonstrates the merits of sustainable and renewable energy alternatives. As part of the project, a scholarship fund was established with Cincinnati State Technical College specifically for residents of Uptown's member communities. The fund provides three scholarships for Cincinnati State's Solar PV Installer Certificate Program. The project also created and retained jobs and established Uptown and Cincinnati on the forefront of Ohio's emerging green economy.

Uptown Litter Abatement

Funding is provided through a partnership with Keep Cincinnati Beautiful for litter abatement in Uptown's business district areas, removing over 100,000 pounds of litter annually. This program has dramatically improved the livability of Uptown Cincinnati.

Uptown Business Retention & Small Business Development

The Consortium formed a partnership with the Hamilton County Economic Development Company to implement a business retention program to identify at-risk businesses and identify and support potential business expansion opportunities. The program also provides technical assistance and small business coaching to businesses in Uptown. Over 100 businesses are assisted annually through this program.

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Melink Solar Canopy at the Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Garden.

TRANSPORTATION AND PLANNING

New Uptown Interchange

The organization provided funding and on-going advocacy to create a new interchange on I-71 to improve access in Uptown. The project began construction this summer. Once completed, it has the potential to create 7,000 jobs and induce over \$750 million in investments.

Way-finding System

The Consortium spearheaded the effort to create and install new way-finding signage throughout Uptown. Previously, the signage was confusing, dilapidated, and in many instances inaccurate or lacking altogether. This new system has improved access and way finding throughout the area.

Transit Improvements

The organization worked with Queen City Metro in designing improved and direct routes to Uptown Cincinnati. The goal is to increase transit ridership within the second largest employment center in the region. The transit authority has also invested \$6 million in collaboration with the city of Cincinnati to create enhanced bus shelters, improved signage, and branding to create an Uptown Transit District.

Land Use and Transportation Planning

In 2013 in conjunction with the city of Cincinnati, the Consortium launched a Corridor Planning Study for the area along Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard (MLK) and Reading Road. This study is critical in order to proactively plan for the impacts of the proposed construction of a new interchange at the intersection of MLK and I-71 in the next few years.

The Uptown community wants to see the MLK corridor be a connector among the institutions, business districts, and neighborhoods and become a mixed-use district/place where pedestrians can feel comfortable participating in the vibrancy that this area offers. The community also wants to avoid the possibility of the corridor evolving further towards an auto oriented route between I-71 and I-75 when the new I-71/MLK interchange is completed.

The plan's purpose is to provide a blueprint to achieve a desirable mix of land uses, transportation infrastructure elements, and urban design, and to guide investment that will protect the existing institutions and neighborhoods from the impacts of the future highway interchange. While the new interchange is desired, the plan will provide the opportunity to proactively enhance the corridor from a pedestrian, residential, business, and sense-of-place perspective. It will reflect the community's vision for a vibrant, diverse, healthy, and growing mixed-use node within the Cincinnati region.

SAFETY

Crime is down precipitously in Uptown since the Consortium's creation in 2004. In the last year alone, Part 1 crimes (violent and property) are down by 12 percent. In 2006, there were 4,586 Part 1 crimes in the area; by 2012, that number had been reduced to 3,594.

The Cincinnati Police, Uptown Consortium, University of Cincinnati, and local residents and community councils have worked diligently to keep safety at the forefront by developing neighborhood-specific crime prevention strategies, initiating public outreach programs, and improving current police response methods. The following initiatives are just a few examples of how the community is addressing the ongoing issue of safety.

NEW I-71 INTERCHANGE SERVING UPTOWN

The Ohio Department of Transportation began construction this summer on a new Uptown interchange on I-71 and Martin Luther King Drive. Completion of a new, full interchange will provide full interstate access to the second largest employment center in the Cincinnati metropolitan area. An interchange at Martin Luther King Drive was part of the original plan for the I-71 interstate in the 1970s but was eliminated during construction due to budget considerations.

The Uptown Consortium began working to remove this access impediment in 2006 by joining with several partners, including the city of Cincinnati, the Ohio Department of Transportation, and the Ohio-Kentucky-Indiana Regional Council of Governments. Together, they commissioned the Uptown Transportation Study, which looked at all aspects of transportation in the area and provided detailed recommendations for substantive change. The study included a recommendation for improved access to I-71 near Martin Luther King Drive.

In 2009, the Consortium and its partners initiated and funded the Uptown Access Study. The work was guided by the Implementation Partners, a core group of community stakeholders organized to provide input and direction on plan recommendations. Completion of this study resulted in the selection of a preferred design for the new interchange.

The Consortium forged key partnerships to advocate for the project and secure funding. The organization secured additional support for the project from the Hamilton County Commissioners, the Greater Cincinnati Chamber of Commerce, and the Cincinnati Business Committee in addition to the original project sponsors. With universal community support, the financing pieces came together with the Ohio Department of Transportation committing \$60 million toward the \$105 million cost of the project. The Ohio-Kentucky-Indiana Regional Council of Governments contributed \$25 million, and the city of Cincinnati closed the financing gap with a \$20 million funding commitment. The interchange will be completed in the fall of 2016.

The immediate benefits of the interchange include improved access to Uptown for employees, residents, visitors, and people seeking health care. Long term, the interchange will have a positive impact on jobs and private development, attracting new jobs and spin-off development and resulting in the retention and expansion of existing local employment.



Uptown Camera Surveillance Initiative

The Uptown Consortium's Safety Committee worked with the Cincinnati Police to plan and finance the installation of surveillance cameras at strategic locations in the Avondale, Clifton, and Coryville business districts. The organization contributed \$132,000 toward installation.

The University of Cincinnati Policing Institute

The organization contracts with the University of Cincinnati Policing Institute to provide crime analysis reports for each Uptown neighborhood. Results are then shared with the Cincinnati Police and community councils so that neighborhood-specific strategies for deterring crime can be put in place.

LESSONS LEARNED

The Consortium has learned several significant lessons over its ten-year history. First, catalytic development takes longer and requires more investment than anticipated. In the beginning, the Consortium projected a much quicker pace in inducing private investment and a higher rate of return on investment. We have had to adjust those projections to reflect the realities of market conditions.

Second, no single entity can solve all the issues facing urban neighborhoods. Strong partnerships must be developed and sustained over time with local government, nonprofit service providers, and the community in order to advance the mission.


Third, realistic goals and objectives must be developed based on financial resources and capacity. The Con-

sortium has scaled back the organization's original goals to align with what can be realistically accomplished with available resources.

Finally, community stakeholders must be engaged fully in the planning and execution of development and program initiatives. This is key to developing a full and sustainable partnership based on shared objectives.

The creation of the Uptown Consortium by the CEOs of the five largest institutions in the city of Cincinnati was a bold and innovative move. These institutions realized that they were in a unique position to improve their surrounding communities. The members have embraced their role as anchor institutions and assumed greater responsibility for economic and community development. They have committed their leadership, expertise, and capital to improve Uptown and enhance their ability to attract talent, students, and patients.

The organization has been innovative in its approach to community engagement. Through a series of committees and other vehicles, it has fully engaged stakeholders in the Uptown neighborhoods, which has resulted in true partnerships and collaboration.

The Uptown Consortium model is replicable in other communities anchored by major institutions such as hospitals and universities. These institutions are drivers of job growth and already play a vital role in stabilizing neighborhoods. By engaging the surrounding communities, these anchors can help remake neighborhoods into vibrant, livable places. 



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