



# COMMUNITY-DRIVEN DEVELOPMENT AT PITTSBURGH YARDS



THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION





#### ABOUT THIS BRIEF

For nearly two decades, the Annie E. Casey Foundation has been a key partner in the redevelopment of a 31-acre former industrial site in Atlanta's Pittsburgh neighborhood. Though the project — now known as Pittsburgh Yards® — has evolved since UPS first sold the land to AECF Atlanta Realty (a subsidiary of the Casey Foundation) in 2006, the mission has remained the same: spur more equitable career, entrepreneurship and wealth-building opportunities for Black residents in the surrounding communities of Neighborhood Planning Unit V (NPU-V).

To realize that vision, staff in Casey's Atlanta Civic Site, which serves as primary investor and advisor on the project, used the Foundation's *Race Equity and Inclusion Action Guide*<sup>1</sup> as a blueprint. In doing so, Casey and the Pittsburgh Yards development team have prioritized community engagement from the start, maximizing community-based strengths and assets and creating pathways for residents to participate in key decision-making processes.

This brief describes those community engagement efforts and identifies lessons and recommendations that may be useful to other organizations interested in undertaking similar redevelopment efforts.

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#### ABOUT THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private philanthropy that creates a brighter future for the nation's children and youth by developing solutions to strengthen families, build paths to economic opportunity and transform struggling communities into safer and healthier places to live, work and grow.

For more information, visit the Foundation's website at [www.aecf.org](http://www.aecf.org).

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## NEIGHBORHOOD CONTEXT

With a rich history dating back generations, the neighborhood surrounding Pittsburgh Yards was founded by formerly enslaved people in the 1880s near active rail yards. The railroad smoke, resembling the smog produced by the steel mills in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, gave the neighborhood its name.<sup>2</sup> Over several decades, the Pittsburgh area grew, and neighbors developed a deep attachment to each other and to the community. McDaniel Street, a main thoroughfare, became home to a thriving community of Black-owned businesses and a host of churches that were filled with congregants on Sunday mornings.

Over time, the Pittsburgh community, like many across Atlanta, declined economically because of discriminatory policies and practices, including mortgage redlining, an inadequate sewer system, unpaved roads, underfunded schools and long-term disinvestment by public agencies and the private sector. The construction of three nearby stadiums displaced thousands of households, and the community was hurt by the arrival of interstate highway projects, one of which bisects the area.<sup>3</sup> During the early 2000s, racially targeted, predatory mortgage lending hampered homeownership and drained wealth. By the 2010s, NPU-V had high rates of poverty and unemployment,<sup>4</sup> and the community was hit hard by population decline, crime and drugs. At the same time, the area was still home to many longtime residents who remained deeply passionate about their community's future.

## SITE HISTORY

Pittsburgh Yards is a 31-acre site at the south end of the Pittsburgh neighborhood, property that was once farmland used by the agricultural program at Clark College (now Clark Atlanta University). In 1951, the Great Southern Trucking Terminal opened on the site and it remained a trucking hub under different owners for decades. By the 1990s, the terminal was almost

## The Casey Foundation's Commitment to Atlanta

Atlanta is one of two civic sites, along with Baltimore, where the Annie E. Casey Foundation has a special connection and long-term commitment to helping families access the opportunities and resources they need to thrive. Since 2001, the Foundation has been working to revitalize Atlanta's Adair Park, Mechanicsville, Peoplestown, Pittsburgh, Summerhill and Capitol Gateway neighborhoods — known collectively as Neighborhood Planning Unit V (NPU-V). This work includes creating and preserving affordable housing, promoting entrepreneurship and wealth-building strategies, strengthening local organizations to galvanize community involvement and promoting high-quality early childhood education and child development. Undergirding these efforts is a focus on resident leadership, equity and inclusion.

empty, and in 2001, UPS purchased the property. Recognizing the site's potential to be an economic engine for the neighborhood, the Casey Foundation purchased it from UPS in 2006. Though the Foundation planned to serve as an advisor for the redevelopment, it created a separate entity, AECF Atlanta Realty, to manage the property and all business dealings to ensure longevity and independence.

Soon after, Casey began engaging community residents in planning the project and undertook environmental assessments at the site. That work came to a halt with the Great Recession in 2008. The project subsequently regained momentum, and in 2017, a development agreement for the site was finalized.

The property sits in an opportunity-rich location that borders part of Atlanta's BeltLine,<sup>5</sup> an ambitious regional transportation and economic development project, with a light rail stop planned for the site. With access to the BeltLine, the Pittsburgh Yards project and surrounding communities are primed to see increased economic activity.

The \$26 million first phase of development is taking place on the east side of the property and includes the 61,000-square-foot former trucking terminal. Once a bare steel frame, the building has been fitted with 101 workspaces for lease by businesses, including administrative, artisanal and creative enterprises. The redesigned building has conference spaces, an amphitheater and five apartment units, and will eventually house a shared kitchen. The project includes outdoor space for repurposed shipping containers that can become workspaces, as well as storefronts and five development-ready sites that could be used for things such as community-focused retail enterprises, e-commerce distribution centers and extended office space.

The project is intended to create family-supporting jobs with long-term career options and opportunities for entrepreneurs to start and grow businesses. It also has been designed with areas for use by the surrounding neighborhoods — including a natural-grass green space, the James Bridges Field, and a community gathering space — that utilize arts and culture reflecting the community.

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

### Early Planning

From the time it began imagining possibilities for the site, the Casey Foundation recognized the critical importance of engaging community members and local businesses to shape the redevelopment. The Foundation sought to maximize strengths within the community to seed and grow social networks and foster strong resident involvement. After the land was acquired in 2006, more than 300 residents and representatives from community-based organizations took part in training to increase their knowledge of community change.

In 2007, Casey's Atlanta Civic Site team launched the Community Economic Development Institute (CEDI), an initiative to help residents understand the ins and outs of economic development. Along with the broader discussions about economic development, the program weaved in rich conversations about the project site and the opportunities it held for the community. The goal was to prepare a cadre of residents to play a





part in decision making about the project. The CEDI was facilitated by community economic development experts from Georgia Tech's Innovation Institute and the University of Georgia's Fanning Institute. It trained 65 residents from several surrounding neighborhoods on such topics as transit-oriented development, resident ownership, business attraction, financing, public art and parks and green space.

In 2008, residents who took part in the CEDI helped lead a second stage of engagement: community study circles to develop priorities for the project. Participants included residents, small business owners, investors, local architects, designers, artists, public officials and representatives from the BeltLine and the Atlanta Development Authority. With community development experts providing technical assistance, the study circle's open-ended meetings gave residents the chance to articulate their priorities for redevelopment, which included job creation, business development, sustainability, development to take advantage of the site's access to public transit, long-term affordability and public art and culture. Residents also voiced support for new commercial businesses, including a grocery store. But that process stalled when the Great Recession forced a pause in the project.

When economic conditions improved, the project resumed, and a formal market study was launched in 2013 to document market constraints and identify the kinds of economic activity that would be feasible as Atlanta and the rest of the country emerged from the recession. After a Request for Proposals (RFP) process, a consulting team comprising RW Ventures, Mass Economics and Stoss Landscape Urbanism was selected to lead the market study. In addition to a traditional scan of market data, the study included community sessions and interviews to gather feedback and ideas from residents and local business owners. A kitchen cabinet of stakeholders — including residents, nonprofit representatives and experts in financing and development — provided regular feedback on the process.

The analysis considered the site's development constraints and assessed the potential of various scenarios to create living-wage jobs that could be filled by residents.

Completed in 2014, the market study identified three options: a transportation, distribution and logistics facility with a mix of blue- and white-collar jobs; a business-to-business facility providing both back-office services and a mix of industrial and commercial operations; and a blue-collar innovation hub housing coworking and incubator space, private offices, workshops and labs.

The study was shared with community members to help them understand market parameters for the project. Some people involved in the early phase of community engagement, including residents, found this process to be frustrating and perhaps improperly sequenced. For example, while many residents voiced early support for a grocery store on the site, the market study did not recommend that as an option. The analysis found that such a store would not create enough well-paying jobs, would require ongoing subsidies and would force the site to devote valuable space to parking, rather than uses that would create jobs. In retrospect, doing the market study earlier

## A Broader Commitment to the Community

The Casey Foundation is committed to engaging with the NPU-V community of Atlanta beyond the Pittsburgh Yards project with a goal of supporting residents to be leaders and advocates.

In 2018, the Partnership for Southern Equity and Casey developed Resident Leaders for Equity,<sup>6</sup> a program to equip individuals living in NPU-V with tools and resources to create positive community change. The program has worked with three groups of residents (including one group that consisted exclusively of young people), focusing on building leadership skills to deal with a range of issues, including racial inequity, advocacy and gentrification. Two participants in this program have become active leaders in shaping the Pittsburgh Yards project.

Casey also has developed the Community Investment Fund,<sup>7</sup> overseen by a board comprising NPU-V residents that decides on funding for projects. Board members receive training and other opportunities to build their leadership skills.

in the process may have helped lay out realistic parameters before asking residents to brainstorm about possibilities.

#### **Launching the Redevelopment**

Capturing the findings of the market study and earlier feedback from the community, Casey laid out a plan for the site — a light industrial hub that would be a catalyst for community transformation, not merely a real estate transaction. The project would create dozens of workspaces for entrepreneurs, manufacturing and commercial uses; generate living-wage jobs; and provide new community assets. Casey also established an independent entity — 352 University Avenue Associates — to manage the development of the property, with a board composed of Casey representatives and others with expertise in community development. This structure helped to give the project some independence from the Foundation and allowed for more accelerated decision making.

In 2014, the Foundation launched a two-stage process to bring on a development team to lead the project. Casey issued a request for qualifications for a master developer that fall, and community members participated in the review team that selected three developers to submit formal proposals.

In the proposal phase, the Foundation invited two community members from each of the four adjacent communities to provide ratings and comments, and six of the eight invited people participated. At a public meeting, the two final development teams presented their concepts separately to community members, whose feedback factored into the final selection. According to the developers who took part, this process had far more community involvement than previous development projects in the area.

In 2015, Casey selected a development group made up of two main partners, Columbia Ventures and The Core Venture Studio. After extensive discussions, a development agreement for the first phase was finalized in 2017.

Casey Foundation staff helped plan community engagement for the first phase of construction. The

development team considered working through the existing community groups in the NPU-V area to engage residents to shape key aspects of the project, but ultimately decided to launch monthly community meetings to create a more direct relationship with a broader group of residents. The Foundation invited leaders of community organizations to join the meetings, and other residents also seized the opportunity to step up and play meaningful roles in the process. From 2017 to 2020, the team held more than three dozen community meetings, public outings and information-gathering sessions, with 55 people attending on average.

The development team tapped one of their representatives, James Harris, to facilitate these community meetings. Well suited to the work, Harris successfully established a welcoming tone that encouraged free thinking and participation. He took the time to meet individually with many members of the community — building relationships, making sure they felt heard and gaining respect from key community leaders.

In addition to the monthly meetings, the development team launched a series of site visits around Atlanta to see and explore a range of projects that could help shape residents' understanding of what could come to Pittsburgh Yards. These visits included an outdoor play space and two projects, a coffee shop and donut bakery, that used repurposed shipping containers. Those who took part in the visits reported back to other residents at the monthly community meetings, where guest speakers were brought in to educate and inspire residents. The project also hosted meetings with prospective tenants and small business owners — such as welders, seamstresses and bakers — to hear their feedback on plans for the building's design. By doing so, the team hoped to expose community members to the types of entrepreneurs who could benefit from the project and begin establishing rapport among longtime residents and those who may be entering the neighborhood.

Along with the regular community-wide meetings, the Casey Foundation and the development team established work groups and task forces to focus

on specific aspects of the project: art and history, development and jobs and job culture. The plan took time to implement, and the work groups grew stronger. Shorter-term task forces focused on entrepreneurship, branding, naming and the project groundbreaking. With support from staff members, each group has been led by a community member to build residents' leadership skills. Residents also planned several events, including an annual flea market and youth recreation activities, to bring life to the site before and during construction and to connect more residents to the project.

### COMMUNITY-DRIVEN DECISION MAKING

As soon as they came on board, the development team began identifying opportunities for community members to lead key aspects of the project, beginning with its name. For years, the project was referred to as UNAVE, an abbreviation of the property's address, 352 University Avenue. In October 2017, a resident-led work group proposed the name Pittsburgh Yards, reflecting the site's extensive railroad-related history. The name was finalized through a community voting process, which included the distribution of 600 booklets — each outlining the naming work group's seven options — to local school pickup lines, churches and community centers. More than 300 votes were cast using a custom-built telephone line that allowed community members to dial the number (1–7) that corresponded to their selection. Voters were also allowed to leave a voicemail to express thoughts about their selection.

The naming work group also came up with the name of the redeveloped structure, The Nia Building, which references the Swahili term for “purpose,” one of the seven principles of Kwanzaa. In addition, the community led the naming of other locations inside the building and throughout the site after historic people, places and events in Pittsburgh.

The new building has a distinct community feel. An interior design firm worked with artists to create new installations for the building that include portraits of NPU-V residents and banners recognizing leaders, artists and change makers from the area.

### The Development Team

The development team for Pittsburgh Yards represented a partnership of two firms with different backgrounds. Columbia Ventures is an Atlanta-based real estate development company founded in 2013 that focuses on urban development combining commercial and residential uses, with an emphasis on high-quality housing and public-private partnerships. It partnered with The Core Venture Studio, an Atlanta-based venture capital and real estate development firm focused on projects that foster entrepreneurship.

The team understood that the Pittsburgh Yards project would not be a typical construction project. Rather, it committed to ensuring meaningful community involvement at every stage. Over the five-year project, the development team interacted extensively with members of the community, with much of that work led by Core Venture. James Harris, a Core partner who lived within walking distance of the Pittsburgh Yards site, had led a neighborhood organization and became the most visible public representative of the project. “In some ways, I was sort of born for this project. I lived not far away, and my family had connections to Clark College,” Harris says.

Ryan Akin, of Columbia Ventures, says that bringing community members into the project required hard work and trust. “It starts with a sincere desire to work with community members,” Akin says. “I don’t know how someone could do this process without that sincere desire. This type of work is challenging and ever-evolving. You’re doing everything you can for all of the various stakeholders involved in the development, while also trying to adhere to a schedule and a budget. It’s not going to work out perfectly, but you hope the genuine effort to find mutually beneficial solutions at every juncture resonates with current community members and the generations to come.”

For the developers, the project was about more than simply erecting a new structure. “We really looked at this as a new business, something unique. This is different, as it was really a community benefit. It wasn’t just a building or a parking lot. We treated it as a startup that is bringing benefits to the community,” Harris says. “We hope that continues to play out at Pittsburgh Yards.”



The selection of artists to display works at the site illustrated some of the challenges of achieving strong community engagement. To guide the art process, the development team brought on a local interior design firm. When the firm initially selected artists, none were from the neighborhoods surrounding Pittsburgh Yards. The Casey team asked the firm to implement an RFP process to give local artists an opportunity to be considered. The design firm partnered with a local artist, Meredith Kooi, to help oversee the selection process, which led to area artists being selected to display works.

The community also helped establish the project's visual identity and graphic look. Community volunteers worked with a local graphic design firm to develop a collection of color palettes, taglines and logos. Several options were put to a broader neighborhood vote, using mailers, meetings and conference calls. Residents were excited to be able to vote on various design options with an American Idol-style process.

Another community-led work group focused on the site's new greenspace, brainstorming how it would be used and governed. The community also took the lead in naming the site's new field and chose to honor James Bridges, a longtime Pittsburgh resident, artist and activist who was known for his long daily walks in the area. The field is open to the community for recreation, farmer's markets and other activities.

## BREAKING GROUND

In early 2018, a residents' work group led the planning of a March groundbreaking ceremony and related events. The development team partnered with a local facilitator on a messaging session to hear how residents talked about the project — their hopes, goals and concerns. That session helped inform the creation of materials about the project, including talking points and information on the website. The development team also led media trainings for a few residents who went on to serve as presenters at the ceremony and give interviews to the media covering the project launch. This training ensured that residents were comfortable and ready to lead the public events and act as spokespeople.



Community members taking a guided tour of The Nia Building.

“It was an open discussion, and someone suggested the Kwanzaa principles. We thought, if we did that, it would be a learning experience when people heard the various names. It was almost a quick decision. I’m very proud when I pass by to see that I contributed to the naming.”

— Annette Samuels

a lifelong resident and active community member



Participants of a community engagement meeting sharing feedback on site plans.

The groundbreaking was an exciting day of community celebration. A poet from the area spoke, a local band performed and a local artist did a painting in real time of the site, which was later sold to benefit the project. Community-run storytelling booths (affiliated with the National Public Radio StoryCorps project) gave residents the chance to recount their memories of the community. Many residents volunteered to help with the groundbreaking event, which used many vendors from the area, and firefighters from a nearby fire station volunteered to help park cars. A few hundred people showed up for what was a truly community-driven kickoff celebration.

In an important step in the final phase of development, the team launched an RFP process to select a property manager, with a focus on sustaining community engagement. Several resident leaders were part of the selection team, and community residents took part in site visits to properties managed by the firms seeking the Pittsburgh Yards project. The firm that was hired, Stream Realty Partners,<sup>8</sup> continued to foster community engagement by working to identify area businesses to be vendors on the site. Stream spent the first several months marketing to residents in and around NPU-V to ensure they had priority access to the affordable, quality commercial space.

### INCLUDING THE COMMUNITY IN ECONOMIC BENEFITS

Creating economic opportunities for residents of the community and local businesses, especially those owned by women and people of color, has been a priority of the Pittsburgh Yards project from the beginning and an integral part of the project's community engagement work. Key goals include:

- Thirty percent of construction contracts would go to businesses owned by people of color.
- Half of hiring for each construction project would go to local residents.
- Fifty percent of new entry- and mid-level permanent jobs created at Pittsburgh Yards would go to residents of the surrounding communities.
- Thirty percent of tenant lease agreements at the site would be with businesses owned by women and people of color.

**“We worked on a series of 11 banners to hang in the atrium of the property that recognize people who have impacted the various communities. That is a positive thing. No matter what happens in that building 15 years from now, there will be a footprint of information about the community.”**

**– Winfrey Young**  
vice president of the Pittsburgh  
Neighborhood Association



Investors and project supporters celebrating the groundbreaking of Pittsburgh Yards.

These goals prompted a broad community outreach effort. The general contractor held several meet-and-greets at a local library and at the site to spread the word about subcontracting opportunities, timelines and requirements. The team also brought in officials from the Atlanta procurement office to provide technical assistance and help small businesses register as minority owned or disadvantaged, industry terms for enterprises that have suffered from discrimination based on such factors as race, ethnicity, gender or physical handicap.<sup>9</sup> And a work group that included representatives from the contractor and development teams, as well as residents, met often to develop ideas to help people from NPU-V apply for construction jobs.

“They recognized that they were going to need to be really intentional if they were going to make that happen,” says work group member Greg Cole, executive director at Emmaus House, a community-based organization that has long worked in the area.

With support from Casey and others, several programs worked to prepare job seekers and entrepreneurs to take advantage of the opportunities at Pittsburgh Yards. For example, the Construction Ready Program, led by the Construction Education Foundation of Georgia, works with businesses to develop training for participants to obtain workplace credentials. The program helps participants prepare for job interviews and has achieved a high job placement rate for participants.

Other key partners focused on business development include Village Micro Fund, Our Village United, Village Market Atlanta and ACE, a local nonprofit and Casey Foundation partner. As Pittsburgh Yards was being developed, ACE representatives undertook an intensive outreach campaign, meeting one-on-one with business owners to make sure they knew about contracting opportunities and the new workspaces at the site. This outreach was difficult, time-consuming work.

“It didn’t happen overnight to develop trust with the community. It took an average of six visits per business to have that valuable one-on-one conversation. Many times at the beginning, the business owner would ask, ‘Who are you, what do you want? I’m too busy to talk to you,’” says Luis

Izaguirre, who formerly served as chief program officer at ACE. “We learned with time that these owners have gone through a lot. One of the best outcomes is the close relationships that have developed with businesses in the area. Overall, it’s been a very enthusiastic mood about what Pittsburgh Yards brings to the community.”

Another effort, Invest Atlanta’s Accelerate Southside program,<sup>10</sup> provided a range of support to small businesses and entrepreneurs of color, with the goal of helping them move into the new workspaces at Pittsburgh Yards. In 2019, the program graduated 21 people of color who owned businesses, after

**“If you don’t trust the community, it won’t work. If you want someone to be a partner, you have to trust them. Getting to know them is key, and trust is the basis for human connections and progress.”**

**– James Harris**  
*member of the Pittsburgh Yards  
development team*



James Harris showcases work underway during a weekly site tour.



instruction in the basics of corporations, real estate concepts and economic models designed to build community wealth. The program was led by Invest Atlanta, the city's economic development authority, with funding from Casey, Living Cities and others. As part of the program, business owners of color have access to down payments to purchase and build out converted shipping containers at Pittsburgh Yards.

The economic inclusion work has met some but not all its goals. A bright spot has been contracting. By spring 2020, 51% of contracts for items such as architecture, engineering and surveys had gone to local firms owned by women and people of color, while 68% of contracts for direct aspects of construction went to such firms. The development team also worked with the contractor to seek local candidates to fill on-site construction jobs, with the goal of making at least 15 hires from the community. Despite aggressive outreach efforts, the contractor and its subcontractors were able to hire only 10 people from the local community, plus a few graduates of the job-training program who were not from the local area. The results reinforced the challenges of developing a local workforce pipeline and reminded the team that such workforce efforts must begin well in advance of construction.

Leasing and hiring for permanent jobs at the site are just beginning, and Casey will continue to track those results.

## LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

After careful reflection, the development team involved in the project has identified the following lessons and recommendations, which may be useful to others involved in similar community development efforts.

### Planning

- Engage community members early and often to understand how proposed development plans will affect them.
- Start community engagement early to give residents a say in brainstorming and shaping a project's parameters. Provide ample time to educate residents about the process and allow time for a give and take of ideas. As much as possible, base project goals on residents' priorities.

## Bricks and Memories at Pittsburgh Yards

At a community meeting about the Pittsburgh Yards project in late 2017, residents of the area were asked for ideas about enhancing the site. Michelle Jones, a Pittsburgh resident, had one. During the Atlanta Olympics in 1996, a walkway was built using bricks bearing the names of supporters. She bought a brick and has often gone back to see it, with her name a permanent fixture of the area. Why not do something similar at Pittsburgh Yards, she suggested. "The idea was that people would be able to buy a brick and recognize family members who lived or worked or thrived in that neighborhood," she says.

The suggestion lingered, and a year later Jones fleshed out the concept, developed a 3-D model of the proposed walkway and put together a presentation for the development team. The idea was a hit, and several residents volunteered to help. Jones and her team created a nonprofit, PY Community Inc., to help with fundraising.

While Jones had experience in the private sector, she had never worked with a nonprofit. "It was a huge learning curve, a lot of Googling and spending hours developing this organization," she says. Her team created posters and flyers and mailed information to residents and businesses about how to buy bricks. They attended neighborhood meetings and visited churches and businesses to generate interest. "Our theme is to pave a trail to connect the community one brick at a time, and that's exactly what we're doing," she says.

The S-shape brick trail will be at least 1,000 feet long and about 15 feet wide. As of spring 2021, the organization had sold more than 320 bricks, with a goal of 6,000. Proceeds will pay for amenities on the site, such as benches, entrance signs and artwork. The brick path will eventually connect with the BeltLine, a walking and biking path under construction (and eventually to include a light rail stop), creating new opportunities for people to access the Pittsburgh Yards site.

Those buying bricks are proud to be part of Pittsburgh Yards. Some have engraved their wedding date; others have bought bricks in memory of loved ones. One resident even commemorated Speakeasy, a former neighborhood bar, where she met her husband many years ago. "They're just excited to have something in the ground they can visit at this new development," Jones says.

She credits the development team with creating a strong community engagement process for Pittsburgh Yards. "This is another level of community engagement that I've never seen," she says. "It sure would be nice if other people in other areas knew this is the way a project can be developed."



- Create a setting that allows residents to discuss the pros and cons of a project's parameters, goals and priorities.
- Let community members identify their priorities and values for a project but be transparent about the limitations and obstacles that development protocols or market realities may pose. Work together to redefine the project within those limitations.
- Articulate clear parameters of community engagement so residents have realistic expectations. Explain what the limits are and why, and be clear about the project's opportunities. Articulate the project's long-term desired results.

#### Development Team

The Pittsburgh Yards project required the developers to lead deep engagement with the residents of the surrounding community and ensure that their views were heard and incorporated as the project unfolded. Columbia Ventures and The Core Ventures Studio embraced the community engagement goals and helped identify these lessons for projects that make such engagement a priority.

- To promote strong community engagement, it's critical to choose a development team — including design consultants and subcontractors — that shares a funder's commitment to the social mission of the project. Without that, community engagement risks becoming an afterthought and fading over an extended development period.
- It takes time to build a relationship with a developer that accommodates the demands of community



Michelle Jones is the leader of the Pittsburgh Yards buy-a-brick program.

engagement — for example, allowing residents to pick out branding colors. The project team must reach an agreement on how to balance those needs with the practical realities of developing a project on a specific timeline.

- The development team should be compensated for community engagement work. Expectations in that regard should be spelled out clearly in the development agreement, as well as consultant and contractor agreements.
- In working with smaller community-based vendors, developers should set up processes to meet those vendors' operating needs — for example, establishing a system to advance payments more quickly.

#### Sustaining Community Involvement

- Continuously identify and pursue opportunities for greater racial equity and community engagement, and ensure that all partners are committed to these principles.

**“I think the community engagement has been very well expressed and communicated. I have used it as an example of what other communities should be doing. I like the fact that when they did it, they actually engaged residents in the community to facilitate that engagement.”**

**– Joyce Sheperd**  
former Atlanta City Council Member

- When possible, work with organizations that already enjoy trust within the community. Otherwise, be prepared to take time to develop trust.
- Establish systems and programs to ensure that community engagement happens thoughtfully. Engaging with local entrepreneurs will likely require different approaches than efforts to engage with residents. Establish and monitor accountability measures for community engagement and make midcourse corrections needed to achieve goals.
- Make sure engagement opportunities are consistent and easy to access. Strive to keep people engaged, fostering positive community exchanges that lead to more resident participation.
- Since the property management team will often become the face of the developed project to the community, select a property manager that embraces community engagement. Plan ahead for the transfer of that engagement work to the property manager.

## WHAT'S AHEAD

Pittsburgh Yards held a formal opening celebration in September 2021, an exciting moment following years of planning. While the launch took place as the coronavirus pandemic continued to affect the area's economy, the project team has continued to lease workspaces in the building and enroll coworking members. The Pittsburgh Yards amphitheater and the James Bridges Field are also open for community use. In the future, the project will recruit businesses to build on pad sites that are prepared for development.

Community engagement will remain a priority at Pittsburgh Yards — in current efforts and future development. Colliers,<sup>11</sup> which took over as property manager from Stream Realty in 2021, continues to meet with residents and businesses and promote a welcoming culture and partnership with the people of NPU-V. The businesses that locate on the pad sites also will have community engagement responsibilities spelled out in their leases.



Local artists leading festivities at the opening celebration in September 2021.

## ENDNOTES

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