

Integrating the Environment, the Economy, and Community Health: A Community Health Center's Initiative to Link Health Benefits to Smart Growth

| Peter V. McAvoy, JD, MS, Mary Beth Driscoll, BA, and Benjamin J. Gramling, BS

The Sixteenth Street Community Health Center (SSCHC) in Milwaukee, Wis, is making a difference in the livability of surrounding neighborhoods and the overall health of the families it serves. SSCHC is going beyond traditional health care provider models and working to link the environment, the economy, and community health through urban brownfield redevelopment and sustainable land-use planning.

In 1997, SSCHC recognized that restoration of local air and water quality and other environmental conditions, coupled with restoring family-supporting jobs in the neighborhood, could have a substantial impact on the overall health of families. Recent events indicate that SSCHC's pursuit of smart growth strategies has begun to pay off.

A HOLISTIC HEALTH APPROACH

OPERATING AS 1 OF 15

federally qualified, community-based health centers in Wisconsin, the Sixteenth Street Community Health Center (SSCHC) has for more than 34 years relied on a place-based mission in offering primary health care to families living in Milwaukee's Near South-Side neighborhood, which primarily comprises low-income Latinos. SSCHC's Department of Environmental Health was created in 1997 to address environmental factors that affect health, including deteriorating lead paint in housing and poor air and water quality. The department was charged with achieving a healthy environment within its service area through restoring abandoned, environmentally contaminated industrial sites; attract-

ing high-quality investment; and creating family-supporting jobs to increase the prosperity of the low-income families it serves, thereby increasing constituents' ability to pay for quality health care, nutritious food, and suitable housing.

This approach complements the ongoing development of "smart growth" plans by Wisconsin municipalities as required by the Wisconsin State Legislature. Wisconsin's "smart growth" legislation offers financial assistance to municipalities for long-range planning that links transportation and land-use policies to quality of life in both urban and rural settings. Additional information regarding Wisconsin's "smart growth" legislation can be found at <http://www.doa.state.wi.us/olis>.

SSCHC's Department of Environmental Health program promotes sustainable develop-

ment which will create a viable alternative to the sprawling suburban development that has come to characterize southeastern Wisconsin. Sustainable development features the reuse of existing buildings and land (including brownfields), conserving residential neighborhoods, maintaining local community character, promoting the health of the community, and protecting the environment for future generations.

THE CENTER OF IT ALL: MILWAUKEE'S MEMONONEE RIVER VALLEY

SSCHC's service area includes the Menomonee River Valley, a 1500-acre collection of properties that is adjacent to downtown Milwaukee and Lake Michigan and surrounded by the most densely populated neighborhoods in Wisconsin. This valley was the center of Wisconsin's industrial production for a century, employing more than 50 000 people at its peak. Many of the workers lived in neighborhoods bordering the valley and either walked to work or rode a trolley.

Over the last 25 years, many industrial manufacturers have either closed or relocated. With the loss of nearby jobs, many family breadwinners are forced to commute an hour or more to

jobs in surrounding suburbs. Because few mass-transit alternatives are available, the few workers who own cars must join countless other commuters using the region's interstate highways. Local and regional transportation patterns, coupled with industrial and environmental factors, are associated with high rates of asthma and respiratory illness.¹ In addition, poor land stewardship, non-point-source pollution, and contaminated harbor sediments resulted in poor water quality, which contributed to

KEY FINDINGS

- A community health center can link restoration of the local environment, creation of good family-supporting jobs, and public health.
- Visioning exercises help residents visualize how a revitalized area can look and function.
- These visioning and design events have served as a catalyst for achieving high-quality, well-designed redevelopment.
- Redevelopment of industrial brownfield sites may be an alternative to suburban and exurban sprawl.



FIGURE 1—Participants in the 1999 charrette, or visioning and design workshop, were charged with designing ways to bring high-quality investors and family-supporting jobs back to the community and to reverse the Menomonee River Valley's historical environmental abuse.

beach closings (1 of every 4 days in 2003) and ongoing fish-consumption advisories.²

BEYOND POLICY

The success of the SSCHC-led 1999 Sustainable Development Design Charrette for Milwaukee's Menomonee River Valley (Figure 1) provided visions that fueled the need to develop site-specific land-use plans that would accommodate SSCHC's sustainability and "smart growth" objectives. The charrette, or visioning workshop, involved over 140 local design professionals from the public and private sector. In collaboration with these and other partners, SSCHC hosted the 2002 Menomonee River Valley National Design Competition: Natural Landscapes for Living Communities, which focused on a 140-acre parcel within the Menomonee River Valley (Figure 2). This property historically supported 5000 employees of the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul & Pacific railroad company (the Milwaukee Road), but it employed increasingly fewer persons in the

second half of the 20th century, a trend typical of many Menomonee Valley enterprises. Barriers to redeveloping this site are characteristics shared by most Menomonee Valley properties: poor access, decrepit buildings, impaired soils and groundwater, and low property values.

To obtain ideas regarding the revitalization of the Menomonee Valley, SSCHC held the aforementioned design competition sponsored in part by the National Endowment for the Arts. A field of 25 teams was narrowed to 4 finalists, each with experience in dealing with environmental contamination, landscape architecture, and natural landscaping, as well as storm-water and flood-management techniques. A group of technical advisors outlined design elements for the set of problems to which the teams responded and evaluated the final designs for technical merit before a jury of national and local experts determined the winning plan.

Held over 6 months, the competition process included opportunities for public input. The win-

ning submission included an industrial park that will provide family-supporting jobs for surrounding neighborhoods while significantly adding to the city's property tax base. The master plan allowed for the integration of natural and open-space elements into the industrial park, including a community green, a storm-water park that will prevent water pollution, and Wisconsin's new multi-use Hank Aaron State Trail. In addition, the plan called for restoration of ecological systems within the affected segment of the Menomonee River,

a step which will address the valley's and the surrounding neighborhoods' lack of recreational open space.

FINDINGS

The 1999 design charrette and the 2002 national design competition have been critical in providing residents of Milwaukee with a vision of how a revitalized Menomonee River Valley could look and function. They combine to illustrate an exercise in moving from conceptual analysis and brainstorming to real-world plan-

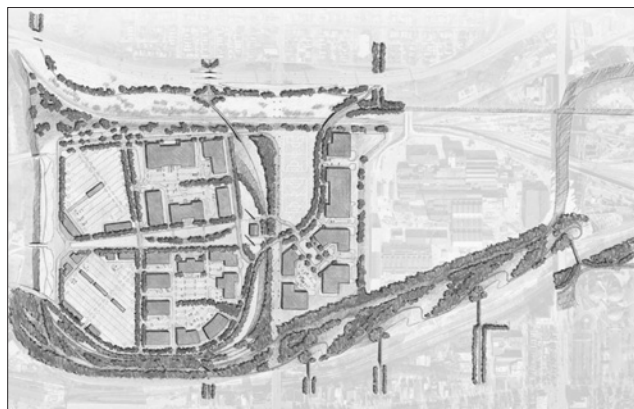


FIGURE 2—The abandoned railroad yard (top photo) was the focus of the 2002 Menomonee River Valley National Design Competition: Natural Landscapes for Living Communities, which attracted nationally recognized, award-winning teams from around the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Canada. The winning master plan by Wenk Associates of Denver, Colorado (bottom photo), provides both development space for new jobs and recreational opportunities for the community in a setting where environmental damage has been repaired.

TABLE 1—The Menomonee Valley Benchmarking Initiative's Economic, Environmental, and Community Indicators for Tracking Progress in the Sixteenth Street Community Health Center's Sustainability Objectives³

Economy
▪ Business activity
▪ Employment
▪ Commercial/industrial property
▪ Infrastructure and access
Environment
▪ Water quality
▪ Air quality
▪ Land cover and habitat
▪ Flora and fauna
Community
▪ Housing
▪ Crime
▪ Arts and events
▪ Health

ning and implementation of sustainable redevelopment practices. Their outcomes, and the widespread media coverage they received, have served as a catalyst for achieving high-quality, well-designed redevelopment that will ensure that people of the adjoining neighborhoods and surrounding communities are reconnected to the valley through new jobs and recreational opportunities.

The momentum that has built around the 1999 design charrette and the national design competition of 2002 has also spurred the successful cleanup of 3 contaminated industrial sites totaling 38 acres. In addition, the City of Milwaukee, in collaboration with the civic non-profit organization Menomonee Valley Partners, Inc, has initiated a master planning, cleanup, and redevelopment effort for a col-

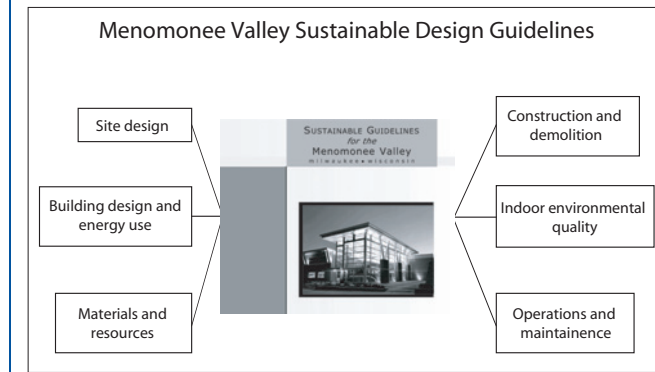


FIGURE 3—Sustainable guidelines for the Menomonee Valley, which identify sustainability objectives for developers and property owners and offer practical suggestions for achieving high performance green architecture.

lection of properties on the east end of the Menomonee Valley, which will add an additional 20 acres of development space. It is estimated that several thousand new jobs will be created in the valley once all properties are fully redeveloped.

To determine an employment baseline, a study conducted by SSCHC and the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, under the auspices of the Menomonee Valley Benchmarking Initiative (Table 1), calculated the number of jobs located in the Menomonee Valley during 2002 to be 9451 (which includes 7961 full-time positions). This study will be replicated in 2004 and in subsequent years to measure increased employment opportunities and long-term progress toward other economic, environmental, and social indicators of sustainability objectives in the valley.³

A community health center can make a difference in the livability of surrounding neighborhoods and the overall health of the families it serves by going beyond traditional health care provider models and working to link the environment, the econ-

omy, and community health. SSCHC and its partners are working to establish measurable standards for private-sector, sustainable development by developing sustainable design guidelines (Figure 3) and marketing the Menomonee Valley to investors committed to “smart growth” principles.

Although redevelopment of Milwaukee’s Menomonee River Valley began only recently, the area is already undergoing significant change. Ultimately, success will be achieved when the valley’s environment is cleaned up, new family-supporting jobs located close to housing are created and held by neighborhood residents, and the health and livability of neighborhoods surrounding the valley are substantially improved. ■

About the Authors

The authors are with the Department of Environmental Health, Sixteenth Street Community Health Center, Milwaukee, Wis.

Requests for reprints should be sent to Mary Beth Driscoll, Department of Environmental Health, Sixteenth Street Community Health Center, 1337 S Cesar Chavez Drive, Milwaukee, WI 53204 (e-mail: mary.driscoll@sschc.org).

This report was accepted April 3, 2003.

Contributors

P.V. McAvoy edited and revised the report. M.B. Driscoll wrote the report. B.J. Grambling reviewed and revised the report.

Acknowledgments

The Sixteenth Street Community Health Center’s sustainable development efforts have received major support from the US Environmental Protection Agency, the Joyce Foundation, the Brico Fund, the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District, the Greater Milwaukee Foundation’s Lenore T. Zinn Environmental Fund and the Geerda A. Debelak Fund, the Forest County Potawatomi Community Foundation, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, and the Wisconsin Energy Corporation Foundation Inc, along with contributions from multiple individual donors

References

1. United States Environmental Protection Agency. Smog—Who Does it Hurt? What You Need to Know About Ozone and Your Health. Washington, DC: US Environmental Protection Agency; 1999.
2. Bannerman RT, Owens DW, Dodds RB, Hornewer NJ. 1993. Sources of Pollutants in Wisconsin Stormwater. *Water Science Technology*. 28:241–59.
3. Menomonee Valley Benchmarking Initiative State of the Valley Report; Sixteenth Street Community Health Center and the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee’s Center for Urban Initiatives and Research. Available at: <http://www.mvbi.org>. Accessed March 8, 2004.