Revitalizing Neighborhoods

As a "City of Neighborhoods", one of a Mayor's most important jobs is keeping Philadelphia's neighborhoods vital and livable.

Philadelphia has always been regarded as a "city of neighborhoods." Yet, many of its neighborhoods continue to suffer from long-term social and economic decline, in spite of a revitalized downtown and select (though limited) growth in pockets around the city (generally areas that abut Center City). The city as a whole continued to lose population in the 1990s, a trend that began as far back as 50 years ago, and the brunt of this loss has been in the city's neighborhoods. Other key indicators - low and stagnant real estate values, weak job growth, and an inventory of vacant and abandoned properties unseen in any other American city - point to the challenges ahead, even with major initiatives in place.

Population trends and demographics

Philadelphia's population continues to shrink, dropping from 2 million in 1960 to just over 1.5 million in the 2000 Census. Some trends include:

- The city of Philadelphia's population continues on a downward slide. In the 1990s, when the US as a whole grew by 13.2%, the city's population declined by 4.3%, a net loss of 68,000 residents. This was the 9th lowest growth rate in a comparison of 13 competitor cities. (See scorecard.) Since 1960, the city of Philadelphia's population has declined by close to 500,000 residents, about one-quarter of its 1950 population.

- The city's population decline is widespread and affects a majority of city neighborhoods. Close to 60% of the city's 63 neighborhoods (as defined by the Philadelphia City Planning Commission) lost population between 1990 and 2000. Twelve of these neighborhoods experienced critical population loss of 10% or more.

- The city's population has become increasingly older. While the nation overall is growing older, young people leaving and even fewer coming have exacerbated this trend, especially for the city. According to the 1999 American Housing Survey, almost half of home-owning households in the city were headed by someone over the age of 53.

Housing and real estate values

Weakness in City growth has been a major contributing factor to weakness in the regional housing market, leading to blight and deterioration in major portions of the city.

- Comparatively weak housing appreciation is likely an indicator of the city's decline. In a comparison of the Philadelphia region's 12 closest competitors, recent housing appreciation (1998-2001) in Philadelphia ranked dead last. (See scorecard.) Data only available at the metro level.) In fact, during this same period, the median housing price for the nation overall surpassed Philadelphia's at a rate almost four times as fast.

- An unprecedented level of abandoned and vacant housing has followed the city's population loss. According to a survey of 83 cities conducted by the Brookings Institute, Philadelphia has 36.5 abandoned structures for every 1,000 residents, far and away the highest number among the surveyed cities. (Baltimore, the 2nd highest-ranking city in the study, has 22.2 abandoned structures for every 1,000 residents.)

- Blighted conditions (as indicated by vacant and abandoned structures) are prevalent throughout the city. According to the City's Neighborhood Transformation Initiative, 62% of the city's population and 72% of the
city's children 5 years and younger live in neighborhoods deemed blighted.

**Workforce and employment**

Sluggish job growth kept the city from rebounding during the boom of the 1990's -- and helped keep the region among the slowest growing in the country.

- **Philadelphia has a comparatively low unemployment rate, but jobs have grown slowly** Even in light of the current recession, the city ranks in the middle of pack among 13 competitor cities in unemployment (8th with 7.6% unemployment) and recent employment growth (8th with 0.0% growth between 2000 and 2003). Philadelphia's relative good standing has probably more to do with the city's lack of participation in the last economic boom of the 1990s. In fact, the Philadelphia region as a whole has not experienced significant employment growth in decades - of the 20 largest metropolitan areas in the country, the Philadelphia region ranked second to last in total employment growth between 1970 and 2000.

- **Fewer of the region's jobs are located in the city.** In 1990, 31% of the metro area's jobs were located in the city proper, but by 1999 this share had dropped to 27%. Dispersed regional employment is especially problematic for city residents, whose car ownership rate (.3 cars per capita) is the 2nd lowest in the country and half the Philadelphia suburban rate.

**What's happening?**

- **The City's Neighborhood Transformation Initiative (NTI) was enacted in an effort to eliminate blight and encourage redevelopment in Philadelphia's neighborhoods.** NTI's research-based strategy has established goals for demolition, lot clearing, property encapsulation, and development (including development of market rate housing). A $295-million bond issue, approved by City Council, is funding NTI's activities over the next five years, including the removal of abandoned cars from city streets, removal of debris and graffiti from vacant lots, and development of affordable and rental housing units.

**We ask the candidates for Mayor:** What is your vision for Philadelphia's neighborhoods and what specific services or programs will you seek to improve or introduce to make that vision a reality?