



Penn Hills Community Development Corporation

Community Census Project

Interviews Summary

03.23.22



The Penn Hills Community Development Corporation (PHCDC) is working with local leadership, partners, and residents in undertaking a Community Census project. The Penn Hills Community Census will employ a resident Community Corp to reach out to their neighbors throughout Penn Hills' diverse neighborhoods to gather resident input on community and household needs, aspirations, and their vision for a greater Penn Hills. Thank you for participating in this initial planning phase of the project.

Following are summary outcomes from 27 preliminary project interviews with members of the PHCDC board as well as a selection of community leaders and partners. We're providing this summary to participants in our collaborative visioning session with the goal of informing you on topics that will guide our work during the session.

Comments from these one-on-one interviews have been captured in their entirety, and then categorized and summarized based on topics that emerged across a range of assets, challenges, goals, and opportunities. Interview categories include:

- **HEALTH**
 - Food access / medical / recreation / safety
- **EDUCATION & EMPLOYMENT**
 - Penn Hills School District / charter school / funding / jobs / library / partners / perception
- **THE COMMUNITY**
 - Penn Hills & its constituent neighborhoods
 - Business / collaboration / communication / government / housing / infrastructure / mobility / participation / place
- **OUTCOMES**
 - Community Census Project / data / participation / survey
 - Next Steps / planning / projects / resources



Health

ASSETS

- Two food pantries provide food access to residents in their areas of Penn Hills
- The Penn Hills Partnership collaborative provides an on-going food access response to pandemic needs and can have a continuing impact on better food access
- The community garden is one of the county's best
- UPMC has some specialized health and housing facilities in Penn Hills
- There are quality parks and ball fields - but not in all sections of Penn Hills and not easily accessible to many residents
- Lots of golfing resources
- There's a perception that crime only comes to Penn Hills, it doesn't come from within Penn Hills
- Community connections in many of the neighborhoods help keep crime low

CHALLENGES

- There are significant food access needs, including many residents and seniors who lack mobility
- Mobility can be a problem for access to family recreation and children's sports
- There's no centrally-located park
- Replicating the community garden around Penn Hills has been a challenge
- Families here are proud and don't want to have to ask for help
- Crime rates have generally been low but that doesn't necessarily match public perception both in and outside of Penn Hills
- Gun violence and deaths are impacting both community safety and perceptions about safety
- The whole region has problems with crime, violence, and drugs - it's not just Penn Hills, it's not just a portion of Penn Hills

GOALS

- Transportation challenges need to be addressed – they are limiting food and health access

OPPORTUNITIES

- The Penn Hills Partnership collaborative can help provide food access to project participants who need to connect to services



Education & Employment

ASSETS

- The library facility, its board, and its nonprofit are an important municipal asset
- Penn Hills School District coordinates with and provides space for out-of-school resources and daycares
- Penn Hills School District open houses attract a large number of students' families
- The Pitt School of Social work provides an important partnership to the Penn Hills School District
- Community partnerships are the key to out-of-school resources for students
- Penn Hills School District provides transparent reporting on-line for information like school safety

CHALLENGES

- The pandemic's impact on students will be real and continuing
- Many students have to bring a range of challenging home and family issues to school with them
- Penn Hills School District debt is still a huge and prominent issue for the community
- Charter School obligations are considerable for the Penn Hills School District
- Schools can be a critical factor in new residents choosing between Penn Hills & other communities
- Perceptions of the schools will take time to change, but unlike the debt, they can be changed
- Penn Hills School District resources are often underutilized or not accessible for community uses
- Penn Hills School District's teaching corps is still overwhelmingly white, while student enrollment approaches 80% nonwhite

GOALS

- Bring quality, effective programs into those shiny new schools
- Kids need safe havens
- Greater community participation in the schools can help deal with the schools having a worse reputation than they deserve
- Bring real improvements and a new brand to the schools
- School district improvements are the key to all work in improving the community

OPPORTUNITIES

- Penn Hills School District can be a critical asset to the project
- Penn Hills School District is meeting its students' challenges with trauma-informed approaches; first-year results show its effectiveness
- 2022 Learn & Earn programs can help Penn Hills young people in support the project
- Partner4Work can help connect and expand jobs resources for project participants
- Trail development can bring local employment and workforce training opportunities



COMMUNITY

ASSETS

Collaboration

- PHCDC serves as fiscal partner for other community initiatives
- PHCDC new leadership presents an opportunity for greater resources and impact
- At least three local orgs support beautification

Communications

- Savvy Citizen app provides municipal communications & government calendar resources to about 1,500 resident users
- Penn Hills School District provides an important communication resource to their students' families
- Penn Hills Progress publication covers most of the municipality, but not in several areas
- Regular community events include the annual school musical, Arbor Day Celebration, and coffeehouses weekly at The Barn

Government

- The library, emergency services, basic services, and maintenance are generally well regarded
- Connor Lamb and Jay Costa have provided important recent government support
- A six-year capital plan is being implemented by Penn Hills and a comprehensive plan is pending
- The new mayor has been working more closely with the PHCDC

Housing

- Housing affordability and quality is still very competitive and remain a value
- Homeownership levels are comparatively high and stable
- Penn Hills housing attractiveness grows with Pittsburgh's growing housing prices
- Penn Hills is a county leader in rehabbing homes, with a range of grants, loans and programs operating through the Planning Department
- The municipality vets vacant housing to rehab & sell, or demolish, with over 20 demolitions in the past year
- Realtor advocates are important to attracting homeowners from other parts of the region
- Penn Hills has fewer Section 8 housing units than generally perceived
- The public isn't generally aware of Section 8 housing's twice-yearly inspection requirements

Infrastructure

- Penn Hills stormwater systems are the best and most compliant in the county, but residents are paying the price for that ahead of most of the rest of the County



Mobility

- Penn Hills has immediate access to the Parkway, Pittsburgh & the Turnpike
- Turtle Creek bike path could be an opportunity for connecting trails
- ACCESS Transport is critical for local mobility needs

The Neighborhoods

- Many neighborhoods maintain strong neighbor-to-neighbor connections
- Neighborhood park restorations are underway by the Rosedale Civic Association

Penn Hills

- Residents say Penn Hills is awesome; they also point out the real problems here
- We're not cool but we're a great place to live
- Municipal, school, and library facilities are all among the best in the county
- Municipal population levels have remained stable in the 2020 U.S. Census
- "There's so much diversity"
- Many residents are long-term and multi-generational
- A longtime Italian community is still thriving
- Some of the biggest supporters of Penn Hills are also its newest residents
- Being perceived as a "bedroom community" has its supporters and detractors
- The 1979 state championship is a shared point of pride, but also can be reflective to many of better days now gone
- Considerable tracts of greenspace are located across Penn Hills

CHALLENGES

Business

- There's no traditional central Main Street style district for retail in Penn Hills
- Three principal business districts provide most all essentials for the community, but aren't competitive with many retail amenities available in neighboring communities
- Folks want those other retail amenities to come to Penn Hills
- Business areas reinforce geographic divisions of Penn Hills – "People on the western end don't have to go to the center of town, they don't need to, and visa versa, and that creates some division as well. We stay on our side of town to shop."
- Verona, Oakmont, and Monroeville each offer retail amenities which Penn Hills can't complete with and hasn't been able to attract – "Verona and Oakmont get the new restaurants and breweries"
- More desirable retail businesses don't site select based only on a request to come – "We don't have a nice Giant Eagle because we don't have the customer base to support it."
- Some retail property managers and operators remain problem businesses by not maintaining their property and landscaping



- Penn Hills Shopping Center developers have not been inclined to consider investments in upgrades to the property
- The local Kiwanis has been dissolved and the local Chamber of Commerce has limited capacity to support the business community
- Past retail business recruiting efforts by PHCDC haven't panned out

Communication

- There isn't a single go-to communications resource
- Public perception may be Penn Hills' number one problem
- Many residents badmouth the community, which perpetuates negative perceptions

Government

- Local politics can be divisive and the PHCDC has been impacted by that previously
- The community has changed since the 80s but leadership has largely not reflected those changes
- Zoning, enforcement, and variances can be a source of contention
- Municipal government often is supportive, but delivers less often
- Municipal communications can be less than effective
- Municipal administrative costs continue to expand but are not matched by an expanding tax base
- In spite of being the second-largest municipality, Penn Hills doesn't get equivalent levels of focus from Allegheny County
- There is little or no collaboration with adjacent municipalities
- Both PHCDC and the municipality need to work towards better collaboration

Housing

- The Penn Hills market for sales of new home construction is less profitable than in Plum or Murrysville
- Penn Hills likely won't compete with Lawrenceville or East Liberty for young residents
- Homes converted to rental properties can bring poorer property maintenance than the former homeowners
- Homelessness in Penn Hills can be an invisible - but real - issue
- Corporate purchase, rehab, and resale of homes continues but hasn't seen a significant bad actor for over 10 years
- Corporate home buyers purchasing with cash usually can outbid individual home buyers,
- Blighted housing continues to be a problem in some neighborhoods
- Homes continue to go to abandonment as children don't want to inherit their parents' home



Infrastructure

- Privatizing the sewer system won't lower rates being paid, but it would take away local control
- Higher sewerage fee rates for home buyers potentially puts Penn Hills at a disadvantage to municipalities that have not yet upgraded their infrastructure
- High sewer bills aren't going to change and will increase around the county when ALCOBAN's rate continue to increase and other areas have to invest in the next 5 years
- The Rodi Road entrance has a particularly poor appearance and suffers from persistent, dangerous flooding in storms – funding for remediation has yet to be identified
- Attempts to install sidewalks haven't proven to be feasible

Mobility

- Public transportation does not effectively serve the last-mile needs of those who need it most
- Mobility is a particular problem for resident access to food, including food pantries
- Lack of sidewalks significantly lessens community walkability, mobility, and pedestrian safety
- There are seniors who are especially isolated within the community
- Commuting times have changed with increased Parkway traffic and the impact of the pandemic on business could be changing the work commute once again

The Neighborhoods

- Some neighborhoods have a sense of being forgotten by the rest of the municipality
- Many of the distinct neighborhood identities have been forgotten
- Although blessed with dozens of distinct neighborhoods, there's very little awareness of them across other parts of the municipality
- "People in Penn Hills doing well on good streets won't likely even know how difficult it is for people in other parts of the community."
- Don't try to tell residents what their neighborhood is called
- Several neighborhoods benefit from strong local civic organizations, but there no mechanism to establish them in neighborhoods without them
- Many community leaders lack trust through years of experiences that justify that lack of trust
- The Lincoln Park Community Center faces real challenges in serving its clients while dealing with structural challenges to its facility
- Lincoln Park has a history of being effectively redlined out of municipal services
- Many streets and sections of the community suffer from illegal dumping, likely from landlords and contractors



Penn Hills

- It's a surprise to most people in the county that Penn Hills is its second biggest municipality - "...people have no clue how big we are, how diverse we are."
- Much of Penn Hills community focus is at the very local, neighborhood level, not the overall municipality
- Many longtime residents maintain a negative perception about changes Penn Hills has seen
- Resource allocation to the west side should be more equitable because there is more need
- Prejudice and race are still issues, though less so with younger and newer residents
- There's a mentality in Penn Hills that's about its two places, east and west along Rodi Road, which reflects race and income divisions
- Penn Hills has black bars, it has white bars, and that reflects continued real segregation
- "...it's never going to be 1953 again, there's never going to be gas at 20-cents a gallon again. I'm tired of hearing what we used to be. It's quintessential Western PA."

Place

- Although it's an Allegheny River community, Penn Hills has no river access due to the railroad right-of-way
- The owner of the Allegheny Valley Rail Road will remain an immovable barrier to any river access
- PennDOT is threatening major degradation of shade trees along Allegheny River Blvd.
- The Atlas Cement Plant, U.S. Steel property, the proposed Wal-Mart are all massive real estate development challenges

Participation

- Community participation is a challenge to the municipality as well as numerous community organizations
- Local voter turnout is too low, particularly in local elections
- Even giving away free trees comes with resident participation challenges
- PHCDC's own image may not further the project's work



GOALS

The Project

- The community's respected organizations and groups can lend credibility to the project
- Community collaboration can break down traditional barriers and prejudice
- Communications should use appropriate messages for multiple channels of outreach
- Meeting food access and health information needs will work better when you can go to the people
- We need to facilitate pandemic recovery by contacts with people
- Provide homebuyer and homeownership training
- We have to show the municipality how they can use the project outcomes as a tool for the community
- Increase opportunities for first-time homebuyers instead of corporate flippers
- New investments in broadband could be tied to project outcomes
- A good vision will bring better outcomes

The Next Steps

- Project data should be used to secure funding support
- We need to start now to change the perception of Penn Hills, both inside and outside the community
- Focus on vacant home rehabs for affordable resale to new homeowners
- Focus on the fact that you can buy an \$80,000 home in Penn Hills, not that we need a Cheesecake Factory
- Trail development and connections through greenspaces can help improve our mobility challenges
- More parks and more accessible parks should be a focus for project outcomes
- PHCDC needs to set clear direction for its role in the community

OPPORTUNITIES

The Project

- Get out, connect people, build community
- High school students and new graduates should play an important role in the project
- Leverage project outcomes to bring capacity and resources to establish and support neighborhood civic groups where they're not yet established
- Greater community participation can bring greater community influence to municipal government and policy



The Next Steps

- Penn Hills has the elements to be a model for social, economic, and racial diversity
- Take advantage of the growth of Pittsburgh's East End in the next community over in order to market Penn Hills as “the best thing next to Pittsburgh”
- Business support and recruitment should be addressed by somebody here
- The distinct business areas could share unified branding and marketing to support them better together
- Penn Hills Shopping Center improvements may be difficult given the owners, but it's essentially the only game in town

Outcomes

ASSETS

- The Penn Hills Partnership collaborative's community and partner participation was some of the best in the county for COVID response
- Wilkinsburg's CDC could be both a partner and a model for implementation from project outcomes

CHALLENGES

- Each neighborhood should be able to speak to their own particular issues and needs
- Most people expect studies to just sit on a shelf; most studies just sit on a shelf
- Communications will be critical to overcoming mistrust
- Good intentions won't be enough to overcome the reservations of many residents
- Keep the data private, secure, and under community control
- Focus on the utilization of project data - not on the local politics that some of the outcomes may reflect
- Connecting with seniors and shut-ins will be tough but critical



GOALS

The Project

- Be a convening and collaboration point for all neighborhoods
- Actually get out into the community with this project
- Show we're making a difference to people
- Keep expectations reasonable
- Branding is important but what you're doing is more important
- Be transparent on what's being done and make the outcomes accessible
- Be clear with residents on the importance of participating
- Make sure the Community Corps is informed and communicates well
- Hire from Penn Hills and hire kids from Penn Hills
- Make sure there's a clear role for the municipality in the project
- Get the schools engaged, active, and promoting the project
- Strong partners - like Eat & Park - can help establish community trust
- Make sure residents are informed and connected with the resources they need
- Keep partisan politics out of the project but help more people to vote
- Get the food pantries out into the community
- The information and outcomes should help us better define Penn Hills, who we are, what we want to be

The Next Steps

- Don't just gather survey responses, show outcomes and create a plan of action
- Organization and community capacity will need to be developed for successful implementation of outcomes
- Be deliberate about finding programs and resources ahead of time to support the outcomes
- Pilot projects coming out of the data can help attract larger funding
- It's not just about attracting new residents but retaining those we have
- Neighborhoods with strong organizations can help residents build knowledge and capacity in the neighborhoods that don't yet have organizations
- Economic and business development should benefit from the project
- Create a community garden near East Hills
- Bring recreation and parks to each of the sections of Penn Hills
- Increase transparency on where ARPA and other Federal funding is being used and how it benefits Penn Hills



OPPORTUNITIES

- Get people involved in their neighborhood and you'll build better neighborhoods
- Use neighbor-to-neighbor communications
- Use multiple formats and media for communications
- Use your partner organizations to help in hiring the Community Corps
- Many partner organizations are looking for both service referrals and volunteer support
- Build project leadership from the bottom up
- The library, community centers, and other locations can be survey sites
- Bring in support from our local universities
- The Penn Hills comprehensive plan should include the project outcomes