

# Wright-Dunbar Redevelopment

*Dayton, Ohio*

## A CASE STUDY

### Project Background

The National League of Cities hailed Dayton's Wright Dunbar Village as an example of how communities can revitalize inner-city neighborhoods. The ball began rolling in earnest in 1997 with the launch of a \$24 million effort to rebuild a West Dayton neighborhood that had been home to the Wright brothers and poet Paul Laurence Dunbar. ProjDel Corporation was competitively hired to provide project management, construction management, public relations and marketing services.

Currently, the neighborhood is being touted as one of the region's biggest assets in the commemoration of the 100th anniversary of powered flight. Discussions are under way on whether to link the neighborhood by light rail to Wright Patterson Air Force Base and its Huffman Prairie, where the Wright brothers tested their first crafts. A restored bicycle shop operated by Wilbur and Orville Wright stands on the edge of the neighborhood and serves as headquarters for the Dayton Aviation Heritage National Historical Park.

Wright-Dunbar Village is a 10-block area between West Third and West Fifth streets from Edwin C. Moses Boulevard to South Broadway Street. About \$12 million was invested in Wright-Dunbar Village to build new roads, water and utility lines, in the area southwest of downtown. The closing of major businesses, the construction of I-75 and 40 years of economic abandonment had devastated this community, once rich in heritage. The redevelopment consisted of 5 historic renovations, 20 owner occupied homes, 8 new homes, 8 vacant rehabilitations, the streetscape improves and the construction of a national park. It is a key component to the City of Dayton's 2003 "Celebration of Flight", a tribute to the historic accomplishments of Wilber and Orville Wright, and orator/poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar. The project offered several program challenges including:

- multiple sites with multiple funding from federal, state, local and private entities,
- fast track and sequential sequencing
- mixed use construction
- historic renovation and new construction,
- design and construction of occupied facilities,
- coordination with local community & government agencies,
- and public improvements of adjacent streets.

The initial costs were considerable. The city sold \$7.9 million in bonds to get the project moving. The federal, state and county governments made up the rest of the public contribution.

And the most important key to the program's success was its ability to attract buyers willing to pay up to \$150,000 for houses in a neighborhood where prices from 1985 to 1995 were generally less than \$10,000.

### Joining the Community

Instead of demolishing houses, the Dayton City Commission decided to save as many existing houses in the neighborhood as possible, and to persuade builders to add new houses matching the late 19th-century styles of the existing structures. This allowed the local community association to stay in tact and become the basis for community revitalization.

The Wright-Dunbar Village Citizen Association and the Inner West Priority Board served as the voice of the neighborhood and the bridge between City government and the community, respectively. To develop trust and to foster an environment of corporation, ProjDel's job site office was co-located within the facility that housed the Association and Innerwest Priority Board. Because this facility was already the center for neighborhood exchange between citizens, the safety department, and other services, ProjDel instantly became part of the neighborhood's fabric. We were perceived as an additional service, providing construction expertise for the benefit of the community.

To promote the idea of an improved Wright-Dunbar Village and change the perception of the community, ProjDel coordinated the development of several media tools. These tools included a 5-minute video for use at airports and other places that our target market frequented. A 30 second commercial that ran at different times throughout the development. We frequently made broadcasts on Citicable and urban radio stations. We solicited proactive relationships with other community associations and the Dayton Daily News. We created mass marketing materials for distribution at home repair depots, City cultural events, and home shows.

### Safety and Security

The biggest obstacle to bringing buyers into the neighborhood was the perception that the area is not safe. To combat that perception, the city cut off many of the street entrances to the neighborhood to create a defensible space' and added lots of streetlights. To minimize crime and protect completed work and mobilized equipment, ProjDel partnered with the police and the Association in a campaign to establish a "neighborhood watch". The police increased their night patrols and dedicated a bicycle cop. This law officer spent her days interacting with the citizens and monitoring deviant behavior. We setup hotlines for reporting suspicious behavior, which was reported immediately to our neighborhood bike cop for action. This gave the local community a sense of security, while providing a deterrent to vandalism.

### Cost of Renovating Urban Core

The houses were owned by the city of Dayton, and city officials wanted the three houses renovated to demonstrate the potential of the neighborhood's other vacant houses. As much of the historic detailing of the area, such as limestone curbs and slate walks, was to be retained. These renovations included laying new sewer, gas and water lines, putting up period lighting and taking down overhead utility lines.

The biggest challenge was bringing the houses up to the standards of the new houses being built in the neighborhood within a budget. With some building having asbestos tile, deteriorated floor joists, non-standard doors and casings and electrical/mechanical systems that were no longer within code, our engineers were very creative to achieve our cost projections. Asbestos tile floors were sealed and tiled over, structural sheathing was used to reduce joists replacement, and paint was removed using thermal techniques to minimize damage to original sidings.

### Minority Inclusion

To facilitate achieving the City's MBE goal, we used a traditional Construction Management approach to managing the restoration portion of the project. Instead of hiring general contractors to control all the work on the three demonstration houses, the work was split into small contracts for items such as doors, floors, cabinets and so on. Many of the big remodeling contractors didn't have relationships with smaller minority subcontractors, and the small contractors get left out. To promote interest in the project by MBEs, ProjDel joined the association of Black General Contractors, hosted outreach meetings to the MBE community and visited the offices of both MBE and majority companies to express our wiliness to do business. In addition, we helped remove barriers caused by insufficient cash flow, premiums for material procurement and personnel shortages for contractors that requested help PRIOR to defaulting on their contract requirements. More than 74% and two-thirds of the 30 contractors working on the houses were minority firms.