

Toledo's pursuit of transformative community change: a look back at 20 years

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Ford Weber, a name familiar to those who witnessed the dynamic changes in Toledo over the past two decades, reflects fondly on his time as the city's economic and community development director.

Nearly 20 years have passed since his tenure, yet the impact of his ideas about “transformative community change” continue to resonate.

“We’re seeing more interest in these ideas in Toledo now,” Mr. Weber commented during a recent interview.

“They were being discussed over 15 years ago, but as a community, we must do a better job of identifying best practices and trends in development and actively pursuing development with this approach,” he said.

The year 2001 marked a pivotal moment for Toledo, with Jack Ford’s election as mayor.

During that time, Toledo was facing significant challenges. While iconic brands like Jeep were rooted in the city, many neighborhoods and streets were in dire need of revitalization.

“I am displeased with the condition that some of the neighborhoods are in,” Mayor Ford expressed in a 2002 interview. “When I see new housing

going up in some areas while next door is an abandoned house and a lot full of trash, it strikes me that we just don't have things in hand."

This concern triggered the involvement of public officials and development professionals who shared innovative ideas about economic development.

A spark ignites transformation

Under the leadership of individuals such as Mr. Weber, who joined Toledo's ranks in 2000, small initiatives like cleaning up trash, mowing overgrown lots, and taming wild foliage gradually evolved into more significant projects. They sought to bring transformational change to Toledo's underserved neighborhoods.

Hugh Grefe, the retired chairman of the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), recalls these ideas vividly.

"It's challenging to tackle this work if you approach it as a series of isolated projects," Mr. Grefe noted during an interview.

"While tangible results are important, true economic development requires a more targeted, thoughtful, and comprehensive strategy, beyond mere project-oriented thinking," he said.

Mr. Grefe emphasized that this project-oriented approach is not dominant in successful development markets but tends to be prevalent in places with strong neighborhood-level support from local government, philanthropic organizations, and corporations.

"That is an important consideration," Mr. Grefe said, noting that a common misconception is that one project by itself can be transformative. "There must be a serious effort to make sure there is a community organization to keep the development work engaged and accountable. If you aren't doing that, then your project is just like other projects."

Mr. Grefe stressed the importance of maintaining community engagement and accountability even after a project's completion.

He highlighted negotiations with the central Toledo Junction Coalition during his time working with the Lucas County Metropolitan Housing Authority as an example of sustained involvement, underscoring that it takes time and dedication to effect meaningful change.

Mr. Grefe still takes people on tours of the Junction neighborhood, pointing out development successes and historic points of interest. He further mentioned that thoughtful, ongoing engagement is essential for realizing long-term benefits.

Decline of community development corporations

Both Mr. Grefe and Mr. Weber attributed the decline of community development corporations (CDCs) to the changing landscape of development in Toledo.

At one point, Toledo boasted more than a dozen CDCs serving various areas of the city, but by 2005, most had been consolidated or disbanded.

In 2003, Toledo announced plans to cut funding for these organizations due to declining population and reduced federal funding.

“We don’t have grassroots organizations in this town anymore,” Mr. Grefe said. “It’s time for the city to reconsider its decision not to invest in organizational infrastructure and resume supporting CDCs, as there are successful models across the country.”

For Mr. Weber, who left his director position in 2005 and currently serves as the program manager of economic development partnerships at Bowling Green State University, achieving comprehensive projects in every neighborhood of Toledo is a logistical challenge.

“You simply don’t have the resources to do that,” Mr. Weber stated. “The temptation is to spread resources thinly, but that doesn’t lead to significant change. You must identify areas where targeted investment can create a real impact while still addressing other needs.”

Transformative example: Hensville

Mr. Grefe cited Hensville as an example of a transformative project.

Over the past decade, the publicly owned Toledo Mud Hens took the initiative to develop 19th century buildings along St. Clair Street in downtown Toledo when private developers were hesitant.

The Local Initiatives Support Corporation helped on this project by assisting with new market and historic tax credits.

Mr. Grefe emphasized that a capable, committed organization like the Mud Hens can drive sustainable community change.

New Schools New Neighborhoods, a 2004 plan coming from Mr. Weber and the city of Toledo to improve the neighborhoods around several new schools that were built in the city around that time, was an attempt at a transformative project that was not as successful.

“I think that they lacked the staff and resources to really put together proposals that were quite as comprehensive as we were hoping they would be,” Mr. Weber said of the non-profits that showed interest in the plan at the time. “But that was also their first exposure to this kind of a program. Despite our outreach to try to explain it, I think they aimed a little more modestly than we hoped.”

Restoring the ‘community orientation’

Mr. Grefe emphasized the need to restore a community-oriented approach for success in Toledo.

He cited examples like the Sustainable Communities initiative at LISC and the work of organizations like the Historic South Initiative as carriers of these transformative ideas today.

Chris Amato, president of the non-profit Historic South Initiative, said the philosophy behind his organization does in fact draw from similar ideas to those touted by Mr. Weber and Mr. Grefe.

“We are taking a holistic, comprehensive approach that includes the whole neighborhood and the whole community,” Mr. Amato said.

Founded in 2014, Mr. Amato’s organization works to create “long term measurable strategies,” and “facilitate partnerships” to promote ongoing development in Toledo’s Old South End neighborhood, according to the mission statement on the Historic South’s website.

The organization provides resources to fix homes and commercial spaces, and supports educational programs.

Mr. Amato said that being truly holistic in today's environment involves working with existing neighborhood organizations, and he has found capable, committed partners in the Believe Center and Mosaic Ministries.

Those organizations have benefitted from finding common ground and common goals with each other, often through the Historic South Initiative bringing them together.

Mosaic supports the education side of what the Historic South does, which Mr. Amato said is perhaps the most impactful thing regarding what can make the community change sustainable.

“You can do all this economic development, house rehabs and all this stuff but if you are not developing the education piece within the community you are still going to have things like high unemployment. That brings everyone down and we are trying to bring everyone up. That piece requires collaboration on all levels,” he said in describing Mosaic's early childhood/pre-kindergarten program, which the Historic South supports.

Demonstrated results

Echoing Mr. Grefe's point about continued community engagement, Mr. Amato said initially there was a great deal of reticence from residents of the Old South End, as they learned what the organization was doing.

This was combatted over time through demonstrated results like rehabbed properties and occupied storefronts, and now residents play an integral role in helping the Historic South Initiative accomplish its goals.

“We did not have roots in the Old South End,” he said. “I understand that but what we have tried to do is show the residents that we have good intent, and we are not carpetbaggers coming in and trying to benefit personally.”

It is those demonstrated results that are building the Old South End little by little toward that sustained success and prosperity that also informed Mr. Weber's initiatives decades ago.

“What I'm talking about was a new idea in 2003, but it wasn't new by 2012 or 2013,” Mr. Weber asserted. “Toledo should act like a foundation, insisting on holistic developments that can change lives.”

Mr. Weber likened this approach to keeping water in a bucket, emphasizing that by addressing the basic needs of neighborhoods, Toledo can prevent further decline and create a thriving, inclusive city.

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