

Implementing Long-Term Inclusion Initiatives

By Beth Robinson

HOW TO DEVELOP AND SUSTAIN MEANINGFUL ECONOMIC INCLUSION EFFORTS

Revitalization of urban neighborhoods nationwide is leading to fears of resident displacement in historically low-income African American neighborhoods. Uptown Consortium, Inc. (UCI) launched its economic inclusion initiatives to ensure that existing residents benefitted from new developments in Cincinnati's Uptown neighborhoods. UCI received IEDC's 2020 Excellence in Economic Development Gold Award in Economic Equity and Inclusion for its inclusion and engagement initiatives. The article covers how UCI's economic inclusion and community benefits agreements are benefitting the community and functioning as a national best practice. It shares examples of success, how efforts are measured, and how organizations can implement a similar strategy to establish long-term economic inclusion efforts in underserved urban communities.

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Nationwide, individuals and businesses are abandoning suburban areas and migrating back to the urban core and surrounding areas in both small and large cities. This trend has increased redevelopment efforts in many urban neighborhoods that previously experienced decades of disinvestment to add new developments, amenities and transportation to attract residents, companies and top talent.

However, these efforts often come at a cost. Many of these disinvested neighborhoods are home to primarily low-income people of color, and revitalization efforts stoke fears of displacement due to rising rents and property taxes. And residents have reasons to be concerned. From 2000 to 2014, a greater number of low-income urban census tracts experienced accelerated gains in income and the number of white residents compared to the larger metropolitan area than in previous decades, according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.ⁱ The department's report also states, "The share of initially low-income city census tracts that saw large gains in rents relative to the metropolitan area more than doubled from 10% in the 1990s to 24% in the 2000s."ⁱⁱ

However, development efforts in underserved communities don't necessarily need to lead to displacement. Through thoughtful planning, community engagement and broad-reaching inclusion initiatives, it's possible to bring new development, businesses and amenities to a neighborhood in a way that benefits and retains existing residents and community members.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **There is no substitute for commitment and clear expectations.** Commitment to economic inclusion from internal leadership and clear expectations with development and community partners are critical for success.
- **Inclusion must be a long-term strategy.** For economic inclusion efforts to meaningfully impact the community, they must extend beyond construction throughout the life of a development.
- **Leverage partnerships to create a holistic effort.** Inclusion initiatives should involve a range of stakeholders to develop a multi-faceted and wide-reaching program.
- **Learn and adjust along the way.** Economic inclusion can be a difficult process, so it's critical to analyze and improve processes as organizations learn from mistakes.
- **Listen and communicate openly with the community but expect criticism.** Engaging with community members is critical, but fears and sensitivities related to working in historically disenfranchised neighborhoods will drive criticism, even with positive results.

In particular, innovation districts – defined by expert Bruce Katz as “zones in cities where public and private actors work to attract entrepreneurs, startups, business incubators, generally with the aim of revitalizing depressed downtown areas” – around the world are pioneering social innovation and inclusion strategies.ⁱⁱⁱ According to the Global Institute on Innovation Districts, innovation districts, especially in the United States, “are disproportionately located in the cores of cities, often surrounded by neighborhoods challenged by economic disenfranchisement and high unemployment.”^{iv} This makes innovation districts uniquely positioned to develop inclusion strategies that improve living conditions and livelihoods of

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residents and neighborhoods at-large without the displacement that often accompanies revitalization efforts. However, initiatives developed within innovation districts still offer insights and best-practice models that can be replicated elsewhere.

Uptown Consortium, Inc. (UCI), a nonprofit economic development corporation serving Cincinnati's Uptown neighborhoods, won IEDC's 2020 gold Economic Equity and Inclusion award for its economic inclusion initiative. Since 2014, UCI has developed and implemented an expansive, long-term economic inclusion effort, especially around the development of the region's first innovation district.

ESTABLISHING A LONG-TERM INCLUSION STRATEGY

As the economic development organization for Cincinnati's Uptown neighborhoods – Avondale, Clifton, Corryville, Clifton Heights/University Heights/Fairview (CUF), and Mt. Auburn – UCI is dedicated to improving the wellbeing of Uptown's residents, businesses and anchor institutions through community inclusion, transportation, redevelopment and more. Over the past 15 years, UCI's investments, including member capital and NMTCs, have induced over \$500 million in projects in the community to bring new development, businesses, amenities and programs to the neighborhoods.

However, before UCI was established in 2004, the Uptown neighborhoods, many of which are predominantly African American and low-income, experienced decades of disinvestment. Like other urban neighborhoods throughout the country, Uptown has gradually gained local and regional attention from corporations and individuals looking to locate in communities near the urban core.

New development – and the surrounding fears of displacement – accelerated in 2014 when construction began on a new interchange off I-71 at Martin Luther King Drive and Reading Road in Avondale. UCI and many other

local organizations and political leaders campaigned for the interchange to increase connectivity to Uptown, the region's largest employment hub second only to downtown Cincinnati. In addition, this new interchange would open up acres of underdeveloped land, an almost unheard-of opportunity in urban areas.

UCI and its board members from the Uptown anchor institutions – Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, the University of Cincinnati, UC Health, TriHealth and the Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden – created a plan to effectively develop the new space so it would become an asset to the neighborhoods, not a typical off-highway stop filled with gas stations and fast food restaurants. UCI focused its attention on developing the area into the region's first innovation district, leveraging the Uptown anchor institutions' strengths – research, medicine and innovation advancements – to attract high-growth businesses and top talent to the region.



Uptown Innovation Corridor

Uptown Consortium, Inc. | October 2020 (S&P)

A rendering of the region's first innovation district, a 65-acre innovation and technology hub, leveraging the Uptown Cincinnati anchor institutions' strengths – research, medicine and innovation advancements – to attract high-growth businesses and top talent to the region.

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Some of Cincinnati's largest companies and innovators have already made the Corridor home. They include Procter & Gamble (worldwide leader in consumer goods), The Kroger Co. (one of the world's largest retailers), Cincinnati Insurance Companies (publicly traded provider of business, home and auto insurance), Cincinnati Bell (high speed internet, video, voice and data provider in areas of Ohio, Kentucky, Indiana and Hawaii), Cincy Tech (a regionally focused investor in high growth startup technology companies), as well as a host of local companies and organizations.

UCI began purchasing more than 120 parcels of land, eventually investing more than \$40 million (funds are from UCI member capital and funds from the City of Cincinnati) to secure the property once plans for the interchange were announced.

However, UCI also recognized the need for robust economic inclusion initiatives to ensure that existing residents and businesses could grow alongside each other

and benefit from the planned developments. As the innovation district's master developer, UCI controls the district's planning and design, types of developments, and, most importantly, the economic inclusion and community engagement efforts incorporated into the projects.

In 2014, UCI contracted WEB Ventures LLC (WEB), diversity and inclusion consultants, to develop a long-term economic inclusion framework and lead UCI's inclusion efforts in Uptown. With WEB, UCI established an inclusion strategy focusing on opportunities throughout the life of a development, from pre-construction professional services through construction, tenant selection, staffing and annuity services. This innovative strategy differs from many other inclusion efforts across the country because it extends beyond construction phases to look for short- and long-term inclusion opportunities. This is critical to UCI's approach because construction-focused inclusion efforts only temporarily benefit residents and do not provide long-term financial stability and growth opportunities necessary to prevent displacement as the neighborhoods change in the coming years.

UCI's economic inclusion initiatives focus on two key areas: increasing workforce development opportunities for residents in Uptown and surrounding low-income zip codes and increasing contracting and investment opportunities for local minority business enterprises (MBE) and women business enterprises (WBE) on Uptown projects.

All of UCI's development partners are required to sign Community Benefits Agreements, including high goals for residents, MBE and WBE inclusion and community engagement. Since UCI is the master developer for the project, it can require these contracts before selling land in the innovation district and then monitor adherence through WEB, which works with each development partner.

UCI's economic inclusion initiatives aim to improve the financial health and quality of life for Uptown residents and create career, contracting and investment opportunities for minorities and women in the underserved communities. Ultimately, UCI hopes that these proactive economic inclusion and engagement efforts help prevent resident displacement as development, by UCI and others, continues in the Uptown neighborhoods.



An open, flat lawn on the southern portion of the Innovation Greenway – a green network that weaves active and passive parks, open spaces, and ecological functions throughout the district – serves as a multi-purpose space that can be used for recreation and other uses.

UCI's economic inclusion work also integrates with its community engagement efforts. Community engagement has always been a priority for UCI to ensure that community organizations and residents have a seat at the table to determine their neighborhoods' future. To do this, UCI works closely with neighborhood development corporations and community councils to make sure that existing residents and businesses benefit from development efforts.

In addition, UCI has worked with other partners to address housing issues as part of its larger goals to increase homeownership and prevent resident displacement. In 2018, UCI commissioned Dinn Focused Marketing to conduct an in-depth analysis of the physical condition and configuration of Avondale's housing stock and to understand market trends. The Avondale Development Corporation used the data in its Quality of Life plan to guide decisions around housing development in the neighborhood. UCI also partnered with Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center (CCHMC) and the Avondale Development Corporation on a home improvement program that offers interest-free loans up to \$35,000 for critical home exterior repairs^v to improve living conditions that contribute to safety and health for neighborhood residents. The funding of this program is provided by CCHMC.

Another significant concern is the availability of low-income housing. To support the creation of additional low-income housing in the neighborhood, UCI contributed \$2.8 million in New Markets Tax Credits to the redevelopment of the Avondale Town Center, a mixed-use development at the center of the neighborhood. The project includes 118 apartments plus a health center and planned grocery store. As other developments move forward, UCI will continue looking for opportunities to support housing choices in the community to ensure that options exist for residents of different income levels.

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Residents and local organizations best understand what the community needs, and UCI believes in consistently listening to these stakeholders and implementing feedback, so development plans, inclusion efforts and programming genuinely benefit the community. It's critical that these key members are brought to the table from the very beginning of the planning process – not after development plans have already been established, which is often a criticism of other construction projects in similar urban neighborhoods.

These engagement efforts allowed UCI to build strong relationships in the community. Without these relationships and the support from UCI's partner organizations, UCI would not be able to fulfill its mission as the area's economic developer.

LEADING IN INNOVATIVE INCLUSION

Since UCI launched its inclusion initiative, UCI and WEB have implemented the strategy around several different development efforts in Uptown, including the new I-71 interchange, UC Gardner Neuroscience Institute, and the region's first innovation district. While each project is different and requires a specialized approach, UCI and WEB have implemented the overall strategy in each of the following examples. To-date, each project has shown positive results.

All inclusion goals are set in UCI's Community Benefits Agreements (CBA) with WEB and its development partners, including lofty goals for MBE, WBE and workforce inclusion during pre-construction, construction and post-construction phases. Contractor inclusion is measured as one aspect of the overall project budget, so a specific percentage of the total contract amounts must be spent with regional MBEs or WBEs. UCI's economic inclusion goals include:

- 25% MBE subcontractor spend
- 6% WBE subcontractor spend
- 10% investment by minority and women-owned investor groups
- 12% minority workforce inclusion
- 3% women workforce inclusion

MLK Interchange

The development of a new highway interchange off I-71 at Martin Luther King Drive and Reading Road spurred the creation of UCI's economic inclusion initiatives. After contracting WEB in 2014 and developing its economic inclusion strategy, UCI first implemented the inclusion effort on the interchange construction project.

WEB contacted Kokosing Construction, the construction management company overseeing the project, about opportunities to train and hire Uptown residents for the construction project but learned that they needed to coordinate with union leadership to secure apprenticeships and employment. WEB then convened the four primary highway construction trade unions – carpenters, laborers, iron workers and operating engineers – and several regional job readiness providers to develop a workforce training program that offered training, apprenticeship and future job opportunities for Uptown residents and residents in surrounding low-income zip codes. It was the first time these organizations had met to collaborate on workforce issues. This was critical to developing an effective, sustainable program, so each organization understood the challenges and necessary collaborations to make it possible.

As a result of UCI and WEB's workforce development effort, Kokosing Construction hired 16 minority



An event space can serve to hold large outdoor events and activities (this is a conceptual example of what the Innovation Greenway could look like upon completion).

men and three women who were local union members/residents for the interchange project and enrolled an additional six residents from the Uptown neighborhoods in union-based apprenticeship programs across the four unions.

This workforce development initiative helped UCI and WEB form critical relationships with labor unions and workforce development organizations and lent credibility for UCI's economic inclusion initiatives among community organizations. In fact, following the collaboration with labor and workforce organizations around the interchange project, WEB formed an organization called Pathways to Careers in Construction and Innovation to continue the organizations' partnership moving forward. The group continues meeting monthly to address workforce needs and collaborate on various projects, in Uptown and throughout the city.

UC Gardner Neuroscience Institute

The UC Gardner Neuroscience Institute (UCGNI) is a joint effort between the University of Cincinnati and UC Health, the region's only academic medical system. In 2017, the two institutions began construction on UCGNI, a 114,000-square-foot state-of-the-art building on UC Health's Uptown campus that serves as the leading regional treatment center for complex neurological and psychological conditions.

UC Health, one of UCI's founding members, wanted to improve its inclusion rates on the construction project, which had already begun, so it enlisted WEB. UC Health set a 40% MBE/WBE inclusion goal for UCGNI construction subcontractors and a 20% workforce inclusion goal, reported in terms of race, gender and zip code. WEB was tasked with identifying MBE and WBE subcontractors and recruiting Uptown residents and residents of surrounding low-income neighborhoods to work on the project.

Through WEB's efforts, UC Health surpassed all inclusion goals set in its Community Benefits Agreement



The Innovation Greenway will be a vital amenity in the Uptown community for everyone who works in and visits these developments. The green space will be accessible to community members.

(CBA) for construction of the main building, reaching 44.6% MBE/WBE inclusion – beyond its 40% MBE/WBE inclusion goal – with more than \$20.7 million in MBE/WBE spend. The project also surpassed the 20% minority and women workforce inclusion goal, reaching 22.7% workforce inclusion, including 19 Uptown residents and 37 residents from adjacent, low-income zip codes.

Uptown Gateway

As the innovation district’s master developer, UCI holds Community Benefits Agreements (CBAs) with its four development partners, including economic inclusion goals and community engagement requirements. WEB works with each individual developer to ensure that goals are met on the project from pre-development, construction and post-development phases. While three of the four developments are currently in the planning and pre-development phases, the Uptown Gateway project by Cincinnati-based Terrex Development & Construction began construction in 2019.

In pre-construction and the initial construction phases to-date, Terrex reached 14.4% MBE and 20.1% WBE inclusion for a combined 34.5% MBE/WBE inclusion across the project, reaching more than \$3.5 million in contract spend. UCI, WEB and Terrex continue working to meet inclusion goals across all areas of development.

In fact, after working with UCI and WEB, Terrex adjusted its project framework to incorporate economic inclusion and community engagement efforts in all company projects, not just its work with UCI. While initially skeptical about the ability to reach the high goals set in its CBA without increasing costs or compromising quality, Terrex completely changed its view on the possibilities around economic inclusion.

“Since executing the CBA in June of 2016, we have met with WEB every month to advance our CBA commitments to economic inclusion. But beyond our project goals, WEB has had a profound influence on the principals of Terrex and the way we look at the roles and responsibilities of a developer and the impact we have on communities where we develop projects,” said Peter Horton, Principal at Terrex.

In addition to the economic inclusion work, Terrex coordinates with UCI and its community partners to engage Uptown residents around development plans and to solicit feedback throughout the planning and design process. UCI includes this process in its CBAs with developers to ensure that Uptown residents have a voice in determining their neighborhoods’ future.

Since planning began for the innovation district, UCI and its development partners regularly host open house events for residents to learn about development plans, connect with developers and provide feedback. UCI also created several committees to help guide planning and development efforts, which include neighborhood leaders, representatives from the Uptown anchor institutions, and other partners.

HOW TO ESTABLISH AN INCLUSION PROGRAM

UCI’s economic inclusion model can be adapted by other economic development organizations across the country. Whether organizations bring some functions in-house or leverage partners and contractors depends on each organization’s size and specialties. Still, either method is viable as long as partners follow several specific steps. Following are the critical components to developing and implementing a similar economic inclusion initiative.

Develop strong partnerships: Most economic development organizations likely already have many strong partnerships in their communities, but when it comes to economic inclusion, partnerships are critical. These partnerships include: community organizations, such as community councils, development corporations and business associations; workforce development organizations; labor unions; developers; chambers and business accelerators; and local government. One of these partnerships may also be a diversity and inclusion consultant, like WEB, to lead implementation efforts.



Uptown Consortium, Inc. (UCI) received the Minority Business Accelerator’s (MBA) Goal Setter of the Year Award for its work with WEB Ventures, management and economic inclusion business. Left to Right: William Witten (WEB), Darrin Redus (Chamber vice president and executive director of the MBA), Cynthia Booth (owner of COBCO Enterprises), Beth Robinson (UCI’s CEO), Howard Elliot (WEB), Henry Brown (WEB) and Ali Razzaghi (member of Frost Brown Todd).

These partners play a critical role in implementing a successful economic inclusion program, from helping engage community members and reach residents, providing workforce development opportunities, and connecting residents, MBEs and WBEs with job and contracting opportunities.

Implement Community Benefits Agreements (CBA): CBAs are critical to holding developers accountable for meeting economic inclusion goals. These CBAs should be created in partnership with community organizations before implementation, which gives residents and stakeholders a voice to ensure that the work is in the community's best interest.

Every developer should be required to sign the CBA and commit to the economic inclusion and community engagement goals, but this can be challenging. Many developers that are not used to robust economic inclusion initiatives may fear that increasing MBE and WBE subcontractors will result in higher costs or lower quality work. However, that is not the case, so it's critical to take a strong stance and refuse any workarounds that would allow reluctant developers to skirt economic inclusion efforts.

Create a pipeline of talent and subcontractors: Identify and vet individuals, MBEs and WBEs for potential bidding opportunities. For example, WEB meets with individuals and potential subcontractors every Monday, which is necessary to truly vetting an applicant. These interviews are critical because there are several "watch-outs" that may make a business or individual a poor fit for a specific project, such as:

- *Size and capabilities:* Some contractors may not have experience working on large contracts and may not have the scale needed to bid on specific opportunities. In these cases, WEB refers promising businesses to other partners to help build the company based on its specific needs. For example, WEB met with an MBE specializing in demolition, but the business needed help growing its back-end operations before it could take on large contracts. WEB referred them to HCDC, Inc., a local business incubator, for business coaching as part of UCI's partnership with HCDC. Later, WEB helped the same company secure a contract on an Uptown project after they got the necessary help to effectively grow their businesses. Supporting promising MBEs and WBEs helps grow a pipeline of potential subcontractors so they can bid on larger contracts in Uptown and elsewhere.

CBAs are critical to holding developers accountable for meeting economic inclusion goals. These CBAs should be created in partnership with community organizations before implementation, which gives residents and stakeholders a voice to ensure that the work is in the community's best interest.

Holistic economic inclusion initiatives should create long-term financial opportunities for nearby residents that improve their financial wellbeing and allow them to stay in and grow with the neighborhood. This also means looking for job training programs that prepare individuals for jobs in growing sectors, such as website coding and development and other tech occupations, or jobs specific to the development's tenants.

- *WBE status:* It's important to ensure that WBEs are truly women-owned and operated. There's an unfortunate trend where businesses put a certain percentage of the company in a woman's name (such as an owner's wife), even if she is not actively involved in managing the company, to take advantage of WBE accreditation. UCI and WEB want to make sure that its WBE goals truly benefit women-owned businesses, so interviewing these companies is important for selecting the right partners.
- *Job readiness:* Depending on the job, not all individuals are prepared for certain workforce development opportunities. This is especially true for construction and labor union programs where residents may not be prepared for job challenges. UCI and WEB initially noticed low workforce retention numbers from local residents on construction projects, so WEB adjusted its approach to better vet individuals and set expectations before residents enter training programs.

This alleviates the responsibility of finding viable subcontractors and workers from development partners to ensure that goals are met. Because of this pipeline, developers cannot claim that there are not enough residents, MBEs or WBEs to meet goals on a project.

Incorporate inclusion opportunities throughout the life of a development: Economic inclusion initiatives must be long-term to create a meaningful impact on communities and prevent displacement. This means identifying opportunities for inclusion from pre-development professional services, such as engineering and architecture, through construction; tenant selection to include MBE and WBE tenants; staffing to hire residents from the surrounding communities; and annuity services, such as landscaping, snow removal and paper suppliers.

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While UCI's economic inclusion initiatives have shown promising results and offer a strong model for others, we recognize that neither UCI nor WEB has all the answers. Economic inclusion is a nuanced process. Any organization dedicated to inclusion must be willing to learn – from its own mistakes and others' best practices – and adjust along the way. Just as innovation and disruption in other sectors never end, truly innovative inclusion is an ongoing process requiring dedication and constant improvement.

Measure progress towards goals: Track progress towards inclusion goals throughout development phases to ensure that projects are on-track. It's important to transparently report these numbers internally and with partners to earn trust and demonstrate the effectiveness of inclusion initiatives.

While every city and project is different and comes with unique challenges and opportunities, these steps should provide a solid foundation for any organization to develop and implement a successful economic inclusion initiative.

CONCLUSION

As neighborhood revitalization continues in many urban areas throughout the U.S., robust economic inclusion efforts will be necessary to maintain vibrant and diverse communities and prevent displacement, especially of low-income and minority residents. We believe that UCI's economic inclusion initiatives can serve as a model and industry best practice for establishing long-term economic inclusion efforts in underserved urban communities.

While UCI's economic inclusion initiatives have shown promising results and offer a strong model for others, we recognize that neither UCI nor WEB has all the answers. Economic inclusion is a nuanced process. Any organization dedicated to inclusion must be willing to learn – from its own mistakes and others' best prac-

tices – and adjust along the way. Just as innovation and disruption in other sectors never end, truly innovative inclusion is an ongoing process requiring dedication and constant improvement.

As the developments in Uptown progress, UCI and WEB will continue looking for ways to adjust its strategy to meet the community's needs as new challenges and opportunities arise – and other economic developers should too. 🌐

ENDNOTES

- ⁱ "Displacement of Lower-Income Families in Urban Areas Report." U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Last modified May 2018. <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/DisplacementReport.pdf>.
- ⁱⁱ "Displacement of Lower-Income Families in Urban Areas Report." U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Last modified May 2018. <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/DisplacementReport.pdf>.
- ⁱⁱⁱ "The Rise of Innovation Districts: A New Geography of Innovation in America"
- ^{iv} Wagner, Julie, Bruce Katz, and Thomas Osha. "The Evolution of Innovation Districts." Global Institute on Innovation Districts. Last modified June 7, 2019. <https://www.giid.org/the-evolution-of-innovation-districts/>.
- ^v <https://www.cincinnatichildrens.org/about/community/community-benefit/avondale-home-improvement-program>

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