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The Green City: How one neighborhood is creating a model to fight climate change

DAVID HOLTHAUS | TUESDAY, MARCH 22, 2022

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Planting trees is part of Lower Price Hill's climate plan. Natalie Grilli

Lower Price Hill's environmental legacy: a sewage treatment plant, rail line, and a highway. Paul Grilli

Sophie Revis, Groundwork Ohio River Valley's climate resilience director. Natalie Grilli

Tanner Yess, Groundwork Ohio River Valley's executive director. Natalie Grilli

The Lower Price Hill neighborhood. Paul Grilli





Cities are engines of our local and national economies, and centers of creativity, culture, and entertainment. But they are under more pressure than ever. This is the seventh in a monthly series, [The Case for Cities](#), that looks at how Cincinnati and similar cities can grow by becoming places of choice, as well as models of social justice.

On a hot August evening 18 years ago, a fire broke out in a huge, old warehouse on Evans Street in Cincinnati's Lower Price Hill neighborhood.

It didn't take long for the fire to engulf the decrepit structure as it was stacked high with thousands of metal and plastic barrels that contained traces of some of the most hazardous chemicals known to man.

Every few minutes, explosions were heard from inside the building, as firefighters from more than 20 departments tried to contain the inferno, according to an after-action report from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

By 9:30 PM, the building collapsed. The Queen City Barrel fire was an environmental catastrophe for Lower Price Hill. Residents were advised to stay indoors, as the smoke plume delivered benzene, toluene, xylene, and other toxins into the air. Those same chemicals were also found in water runoff that had collected in the streets and flowed into the sewers.

It was a cataclysmic event in a neighborhood that has lived with environmental degradation forever.

Lower Price Hill is a largely Appalachian community, with nearly half of its residents living below the poverty level. It is bordered to the east by Mill Creek, which, as its name implies, was used by factories along its watercourse to dispose of industrial wastes. The neighborhood's southern border is U.S. 50, a highway that sees thousands of vehicles a day. It is home to the region's largest wastewater treatment plant, where about 100 million gallons a day are processed. The Bengals once practiced in Lower Price Hill, on Spinney Field, but departed in 2000, complaining of foul odors and bad air.

So what better place to begin to restore some greenness to the urban jungle?

"Lower Price Hill has an incredible environmental injustice legacy," says Tanner Yess. "It's a tough place to live, but progress is being made."

Yess leads [Groundwork Ohio River Valley](#), a nonprofit that has set up shop in the neighborhood and taken a deep dive into its history of housing and environmental abuses. It engaged residents in drafting a climate resiliency plan, assembled and paid a small workforce of neighborhood youths, and began to create what it says is Ohio's first climate-safe neighborhood.

The effort started small, but its plans are big.



Tanner Yess, Groundwork Ohio River Valley Working with people who live there, the team developed [a detailed climate resiliency plan](#) for the community.

It calls for increasing the tree canopy in the neighborhood, where public spaces are largely made of asphalt and concrete. It calls for green roofs, or

rooftop gardens, on top of some of the large flat roofs of businesses to cool building temperatures and reduce the urban heat island effect. And it sites locations for community gardens and green spaces.

Its team has helped build a stormwater retention basin. (The low-lying community, at the confluence of Mill Creek and the Ohio River, is prone to flooding.) They've helped develop and maintain a walking trail, and have planted fruit trees in vacant lots.

Next up is a project to intensively monitor the quality of the air that residents breathe. Using grants from the U.S. EPA and University of Cincinnati, they'll set up air monitors near ground level at a dozen or more businesses. They plan to pay residents to carry wearable air-quality monitors to get data on the air they actually breathe, instead of the air several stories higher, where air monitors are usually situated.

"We'll get a true picture of particulate and other indicators of air quality," Yess says.

There is a bigger goal too – to help drive public policy and to influence the [Green Cincinnati Plan](#), which is a framework for a climate-safe city that was first written in 2008, and is due for its third five-year update next year.

"We want short- and long-term solutions, but we also want to connect with policy," Yess says.

Cincinnati officials on March 17 announced they would begin updating the plan, and pledged to meet with community members to get their feedback on the contents of the 2023 update. It will be more than a plan that gets filed away in a desk drawer, says Michael Forrester, director of the city's Office of Environment and Sustainability.

"The Green Cincinnati Plan is a plan of action," he says. "It is a critical, guiding document." The 2018 plan "was a plan built by the community," he says, and the updated version will be too.

Groundwork's strength is in how it engages the community and gets neighbors involved, allowing them to be the experts, and encouraging them to be advocates for greener communities.

“We saw how they wanted their neighborhood to develop, the possibilities of it,” says Carla Walker, who worked on the project when she was the climate adviser at City Hall. “We were all at the table figuring it out together.”

Residents were compensated for their time, and were valued for their expertise in, among other insights, identifying hyperlocal climate hotspots. “They were telling us about places where they had to walk on the other side of the street in the summer because it was too hot,” Walker says. “We matched their personal experience with data we had collected.”

It was an inclusive way to address the issues, quite a change from the way plans have often been developed, particularly in low-income neighborhoods like Lower Price Hill.

“In the past, these communities have not had an opportunity to be at the table to help create the solutions,” says Walker, who is now the U.S. director of environmental justice and equity for the World Resources Institute.

For Groundwork, engaging the community around the issue of climate change is a way to create long-term change. “We use climate-safe neighborhoods to be the driver and the rationale to do what we do: community development and workforce development, especially for young, diverse people,” Yess says.

People like Mohagany Wooten, who heard a presentation from Yess when she was a freshman at Oyler School, Lower Price Hill’s public school.

She got involved, seeing it as a chance to do something outdoors and an opportunity to learn about the environment. Now 17 and a junior at Oyler, she has helped clear invasive species from a vacant lot, planted trees there, and worked on a rooftop garden at her school.

“It’s fun to be a part of it,” she says.

Working from the ground up, rather than from the top down, will be important in developing strategies to adapt to climate change, especially in cities. More than half of the world’s populations live in urban areas built on concrete that absorb heat, but not heavy rains. Cities are major contributors to climate change. That’s why they’ll be on the front lines as the world attempts to

become greener and adapt. As states and nations continue to debate, it may be cities that take the lead.

Cincinnati in 2018 was one of 20 U.S. cities named a winner in the [American Cities Climate Challenge](#) sponsored by Bloomberg Philanthropies. With the award, the city's program was accepted into a two-year accelerator program, about \$2.5 million in funding, and access to experts at the National Resources Defense Council.

Since then, City Hall has agreed to participate in a solar installation in rural Highland County that could generate up to 100 megawatts of electricity. The city has agreed to buy power for city buildings for 20 years from the project. And in announcing the update of the Green Cincinnati Plan, Mayor Aftab Pureval also set a goal of all city-owned vehicles being electric by 2035, "as we work to make Cincinnati a national model on climate."

"Climate change presents an existential threat, not only to our city, but to the planet," Pureval says.

Responding to it begins in neighborhoods like Lower Price Hill.

To take a climate change survey and to make recommendations for the Green Cincinnati 2023 Plan, click [here](#).

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The Case for Cities: Cities of Choice are Cities of Justice series is a partnership between [UC School of Planning](#) and Soapbox Cincinnati, made possible with support from [The Carol Ann and Ralph V. Haile, Jr. Foundation](#).

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