Will Finkelstein

UP 494: AG- *Neighborhood Analysis*

Final Project Proposal

*Challenges Should Be Opportunities, Assets Push the Change*

Macon’s most vulnerable neighborhoods continue to endure the tensions of being unseen. Stemming from residual effects of redlining, the pandemic has only exacerbated these. One neighborhood specifically, Unionville, sits outside of the geographic scope where foundations prioritize community empowerment funding. In a greater push to assist organizers and longtime residents in seeking what their neighborhood deserves, I seek to develop a “Challenge, Asset, and Opportunity Inventory” for the Unionville neighborhood. The more specific task is developing, through data analysis and open dialogue, the framework to assist the Unionville neighborhood’s turnaround and continued push to prosperity.

While times like this can push areas further from a turnaround, I think current timing can instead push a revived claim to space and step into progress. Seeing revamped interest in these places from our new local government- Macon’s new mayor and this neighborhood’s new county commissioner- creates additional opportunity to provide what is needed. History shows how this can backfire, when presumed but unfound problems have pushed the path towards further control from the outside and gentrification to no current internal benefit. With these in mind, helping equip organizers with the data to push their truth could realistically prevent this from occurring. Rather, the neighborhood could push the narrative towards helping THEM seek the change from government assistance, local collaboration, and foundational grants. In planning with and not for, the following analytical approach might change some throughout the semester. But for now, this proposal provides a decent starting point.

*The Current Place and a Past with Serious Possibility­­*

Unionville is a historically black, traditionally working class neighborhood in the “near west side” of Macon. It is located just across I-75 from Mercer University. Mercer has funded a lot of real estate and foundational grant programs that spill into a few “higher-need” neighborhoods proximate to downtown, partially to permit its continued development agenda. As Unionville is just outside of that extended “downtown” area, the neighborhood is unable to access these.

Unionville has continued to transition from being a majority-homeowner community to having a declining older homeowner, mostly renter population. Children, having left long ago and having little interest in holding onto their aging parents’ homes, would sell these to any interested buyer. This trend throughout the community has enabled slumlords. Blight, illegal dumping, and high renter turnover have been constant norms. Additionally, Unionville has had a reputation for gang activity and violent crime since my early childhood. Without going too deep into specific incidents, a significant number of last year’s shootings occurred close to hear. A number of neighborhood commercial buildings have murals paying homage to community pillars who were victims of gun violence. And the Bentley & Sons Funeral Home, easily its most renowned neighborhood institution, provides free services for the families of victims as a social impact program. Yet, there are stories of unity outside of struggle also. Former Mayor C. Jack Ellis, Macon’s first and only black mayor, began his civic career as a community organizer in Unionville. The Frank Johnson Community Center, operated by Parks & Recreation, recently finished $1 million worth of renovations. The Macon-Bibb County Government’s new Public Works and Neighborhood Cleanup Collaborations was first tasked with blocks here. And the neighborhood’s small, but strong business community takes a serious interest in seeing the change happen.

Highlighting current challenges, assets, and possibilities would improve the life of residents but also enhance morale and comfort moving throughout the city. Increasing relations could also lead to further engagement and collaboration for mutual aid/community empowerment. While the current tensions and possibilities seem clear, the numbers to back them up must be found. The advantage of this is having a sense of the indicators that need data to begin engaging. And I also know a few people I can ask to confirm and enhance my approach before beginning. I know how problematic it can be to start this without even asking organizers what analyses they want to see. Additionally, I can benefit from knowing how to go about engaging folks in the community to further note the assets and possibilities. And it is unclear which indicators have seen decline and which others are actually improving without wide awareness.

*The Strategy for Finding Answers*

The quantitative approach to evaluating the challenges involves analyzing indicator changes over time, looking at the relationships/correlation between certain indicators, and comparing these to other similar neighborhoods (tracts) in town or the community at large, likely ones within the downtown area. Census Tract 104 contains the entirety of Unionville and the edge of nearby Napier Heights, so this will be the likely geographic scale unless a better representation can be found. Some potential variables for this analysis include employment, crime, education attainment, household income, vacancy, and age rates. The data will come primarily from the US Census Bureau and possibly the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, but I also seek to use local government data for indicators where the public institutional data fall short. These findings will probably be visualized with heat maps (possibly at the street block scale) and charts including density tables, time series, and age pyramids.

The second side of this analysis exists where the data often do not. For taking note of the assets and opportunities, I will develop a safe and workable engagement strategy that asks longtime residents and people actively working in Unionville to discuss what makes the neighborhood great. I’d prefer for these to be interviews (recorded with permission) so the intention of this analysis is clearer, but a brief survey can be adequate if my connections to the neighborhood deem the interview process unsafe. Some frequency visualizations may be incorporated for thoughts regularly brought up and there should be some graphic connecting responses to the true narratives. At minimum, this will include a spatial asset map and a written list for ones that transcend spaces.

The precedent for these data driven methods involves looking at a place’s connection to the past, present, and possible future. Knowing where stated tensions are backed up, or possibly contradicted, by what data show creates a fuller sense of the neighborhood’s challenges. This also shows what additional resources and reinvestment serve to gain. The engagement piece for gathering assets and stories involves assuring that the analysis does not occur through assumptions. This piece ensures that processes are not occurring at a place but begin to foster collaboration that does not make the academic a gatekeeper. Understandably, Macon’s black neighborhoods have little reason to trust surveyors or university people who come and tell them what they’re bringing, take personal information and do not come back. While my approach wouldn’t have the same basis as these, doing data work with no engagement feels like a gross misrepresentation. Connecting these to the task and area, these celebrate the neighborhood and create a case for assisting meaningful, internal change.

*Users and New Believers*

The organizers receiving the inventory can first use it to supplement or formalize priorities. These could be sections to implement in a new master plan or just opportunities to explore through programs and/or funding. For the funding piece, the organizers take it to philanthropic organizations and the local government. These organizations may include foundations serving the Macon-Bibb County, the state, the Middle Georgia Region, and possibly certain federal programs. While Mayor Miller and Commissioners Clark and Watkins (Unionville actually is chopped into two districts) are the likely advocates for getting further funding for certain programs, this may also connect Unionville residents to further engagement with their elected officials at the state and federal levels. Unionville’s state representative, Miriam Paris, has expressed to me specific interest in engaging in plans there. The churches may also see where their programming can be enhanced or where it’s possible to do more or improve trust.

These decisions will not only streamline, fund, and bring structure to neighborhood’s desires. They will also create a further sense of what Unionville is and means. The major nonprofits in town all have white leadership disconnected from places like Unionville. They generally act based on what they hear and I would not be surprised if their visions of the neighborhood are warped. Learning the truth and spreading this would push progress as well.

*Working With And Scale Might Poses Some Limitations*

From the class, I could benefit from feedback to my questions, discussion of ways to measure an area not perfectly drawn to Census or accessible boundaries, and just open dialogue about what could make my analysis clearer and better.

I have a clear idea of where some limitations are, but less of an idea how to do my best work while facing these challenges. Perceived limitations include the challenges of doing community engagement right now, setting realistic expectations on what I can actually find, and keeping consistent contact with the community. Others are learning how to codify any possible engagement into a format that can be used within the. In terms of methodology, being able to find the most seamless way to quantify the engagement parts could be a challenge. The gaps that might still exist after searching through local data to fill holes in the Census could require rethinking some thing also.

As I aim to keep this in line with what leaders in or with the neighborhood want, keeping open dialogue with them and residents is going to be crucial and a requirement. Doing this only in a month and a half will not provide the comfort and coordination that years of connection would provide. But I’m still going to do what I can to help. If I can give them findings that’ll help future work, that will make things good.

It will be necessary to not try and take this past data analysis for now. With the potential extension, I can definitely explore approaches to proposing recommendations or a plan for future discussion. But for now, it’s just important to make sure I do not move past the first data collection, organization, and analysis. I look forward to beginning soon.