Housing assessment interview content

**Commerce:**

[First mention came up regarding a team member left the team (I think she moved away). She was instrumental in helping with the assessment, causing a setback when she left]

**I::** And then the people who left. Was there any, you know, setback when people left? Or was that not...

**R::** One of the members, Krystal. She was really good with the housing assessment. She would continue it is, even if it wasn't a planned time. So yeah, that's been. Yeah. You know, finding time, she was a little bit more flexible than the other members. So yeah, that set us back a little bit.

[When asked what she would recommend to communities just starting out with housing and neighborhood work]

**I::** If you were to give advice to a community that is just starting or thinking about addressing housing and neighborhood conditions, maybe joining the program. What would you tell them?

**R::** Number one, it's not easy. I think also the first thing I would do is start the housing assessment and complete it. That would be the thing. Within the first six months, that really needs to be done. Because until you know what you have, you don't know what you need. And you think you do. What we have gotten completed, it has surprised me.

**I::** What have been the greatest surprises.

**R::** Honestly, and it's really sad. But the greatest surprise to me is the condition of some of the houses. And I'll be honest with you. You know, it's a neighborhood that I'll go in.

**I::** That was my question, were they were they homes you were driving by not realizing it? Or places you'd not even go because it [your work] didn't take you there?

**R::** It's because of the area. Yeah, because of the area. But also, you know, doing the walk through, some of the people would come out on their porches or out in their yard and actually we're thrilled that we were doing the assessment and glad to hear that we care. And that was probably the biggest surprise, because I think we're not always aware of the situation. We look at the cover and not inside.

I::So we're interested in learning more about what completing the housing assessment does, whether you had our assistance or not. So you had some assistance from Dr. Shannon and myself. What do you think the impact is of that work?

**R::** I really think it's giving us as the city, as this committee, a real true picture of the housing in our city and how it affects everything. How it affects jobs. How it affects new businesses coming in. That's really what I think the biggest impact has been to us, is actually getting a real clear picture of what we have in our city. Does that make sense?

**I::** Yeah, it does. And then how have you used your data so far? The data that you have.

**R::** We have used it. We applied and received CHIP grant funds. And part of it last year was for rehab and part was for new construction. So it helped us locate the best area in the city to build new homes that might help generate some neighborhood clean up and hopefully get it kind of contagious with some new houses going up, people hopefully addressing some property issues. And also, it helped us know where to hold our very first workshop. The area that that we felt needed the most opportunity for education.

**Millen**

And that first year we did the housing assessment. And I called Georgia Southern University and I said I had this huge housing assessment. I don't have any funding to do it with. And do you have a program? And there was a graduate program that they all had to pick a community project and write a paper about it. And so we went over there one morning and presented the program to the class, and we had 15 of those. I don't remember how many students were in the class but fifteen only chose our project, because it was a hands on and it was sort of.

And had you worked at Georgia Southern before?

**R::** Just internships. Yes, but nothing like this. Yeah. So what was their public help…And I focused on that with the dilapidated property. And I showed them pieces of property that our residents were living in or they grabbed they just grabbed a hold of that and they went with it. They love the idea that housing fit in well because they never thought about the asbestos and the mold and the mildew. And they had, none of that. So this gave them a whole new avenue. So, yes, they were all on board. So we arranged training through UGA.

**I::** Ok, so you did you work with Jerry?

**R::** Yes. I worked with Jerry and he got the program together. And then we wrote another grant and got our little pads back here. So we'd have those when we went out and did the assessments that we have 4. I just have those two here because we use still. He came down and did the training there. So the students came over and then we decided as a group, as a housing group. I'm trying to remember all the steps we were going to tackle it in two weeks. We were gonna knock it out because we had so much help and they had a paper they had to write. So they came over and the age ranged from 22-ish to 40ish. And it was amazing to me to watch the twenty two year old, the eyes of the twenty two year old that was so naive to the eyes of the 40 year old that had lived some of this of what they were seeing. Is what I'm saying.

**R::** So we had out of probably 15. We had, I had 4 that were the younger group and that were really a bought in. They just were mesmerized. I still talk to one now. She works in Virginia now and she still sends me grants based on health, mold and asbestos. She did more, she came back and did more surveys even. Because what happened was, crazy thing. When we initially decided that do the housing assessment, we were only going to do our urban redevelopment area because that's what we were going to focus housing on. Well, my city council came back and said, no, no, no, we want it for the entire city. Well, that two weeks we've done.

**I::** How many housing units do you have?

**R::** There were about 1800.

**I::** That's a huge.

**R::** The entire city. I think we'd already done eight hundred in the urban redevelopment area and did that in two weeks. Well, then I had about 800, 900 more to do. And so some of my students in this one particular, they came back. There were several of them that came back and help me even after the class was over with. And they offered, they wanted to do that, they wanted to come back and be part of it. But it was mesmerizing to see them. They, the fear, because we went in some really bad places. Some wouldn't get out the car, some of would get out the car, some. One wanted the doors locked and didn't want to roll down the windows. And I live here, so it didn't scare me so bad and they would all walk and the residents would walk up to my car, you know, and they'd say "what are you doing?' And, you know,

I:: They're just people.

R:: They're just people. But for them, it was and it wasn't the people necessarily it was the housing.

**R::** I don't think this teacher knew what they were all getting into and what impact that would have. So what I ended up doing her doctorate on mold.

**I::** That's fantastic. So what did you do with you when you got, so you have all of this data. What did you do with it? What have you done with it?

**R::** Well, that's what I was going to get to. Once we started taking pictures, there was one thing for sure that was in every yard. I could give me pictures with scrap tires and so when I was sitting here. And I said I could just go EPD just out of nowhere on a so I picked up the phone and I Googled it and I picked up the phone and this lady named Carol answered it and she said EPD. And I said I told her my whole, and what we were doing. And I said, we're just inundated with tires. They're just everywhere. And she said, well, we're thinking about starting a pilot program. Would you like to be one of the first? And I said absolutely. When she said, well. You know, we haven't even tweaked the application yet, but I'll go ahead and send it to. We don't even know what we're going to require yet. But I will send it to you, fill it out and send it back in. So we were one of the first recipients of the whole scrap tire recycling. I way underestimated what we were going to collect. I think we only asked for maybe 18,000, 20,000 dollars and we ended up using about 50. But we went back and asked and they ended up paying for it. We had more tires and I showed pictures during the GICH retreat. And they only requirement was, you had to make it easy, had to be easy for those people to get rid of the tires. So we got together with our city and they agreed to give their time. The city did. And the county because the county had the generator number. So we had to work everything through the county. The city didn't have their own tire generator number. So they did agree that for one whole week from Saturday to Saturday, that anybody that put a tire by their trash can and they had they found the green trash can. No question asked. And we picked them up. I've never seen so many tires in my life, but it made it easy. They didn't have to put it in their car and they didn't have to drive anywhere. And they didn't have to answer any questions, just no questions asked. You put that tire about your car, by your trashcan. And we did a huge campaign about it. And I just can't even tell you how many tires we got. After it was over, we still had people putting tires out.

**I::** Right. Yeah. You know, that's one of the things that, how to you sustain it?

**R::** So we did that in 2017 and it's 2019 and you can ride by the same places and we're back on the same shape.

**I::** Yeah. That regardless of different cleanup that you really almost you have to keep it going.

**R::** So what do you do? I don't know. I don't know the answer to that. I just know that. And that was back when the whole virus came out with the mosquitoes. And so that's why EPD was really focusing on that. And then you started seeing billboards and things. But yeah, then I took it back to the GICH retreat and I think everybody started calling in.

[longer response about outreach]

R::…So after the whole housing assessment, then we started writing the CHIP. And that's when we got the CHIP.

**R::** What we discovered with that whole survey, that 911 addresses were not. I would say 60 percent in the 911 addresses didn't match. So we turn that over to the city. And so the city then did, but nobody took advantage of it because it cost. If we had a free offer, that would be different, where they'd make the plaques to put on the side of your mailbox or house with the numbers. I don't think maybe five people took advantage of it because I think it was twenty five dollars or 20. I don't remember the fee. But anyway, street lights. We discovered where the street lights were out or there were none. And now we're using it to write. We just got a CDBG grant and we are using it for the sidewalks.

**I::** OK. So did you add those questions to your survey?

**R::** I added the sidewalks, the street lighting and the 9-1-1 because they asked me to. If you going to be out there looking at every house, why not? So we added that. That's one thing the city wanted us to capture while we were out there. Anyway, so then we started writing grants. And so once all that was taken care of, we still and we still struggle with this. This is an issue for us. And I don't know if it is for other communities. Even there, the GICH retreats, I never heard anybody talk about it. We can't get the appraisals that we need. And I don't know that everybody understands that. I don't know that the committees understand that. So I don't know and you might want to take the fight. I don't know if that's something you'll want to focus on.

[This came up as part of a longer segment about how hard it is to reach people in the community, which strayed into the CDBG grant]

So, yeah, if you can have some visuals that are in the neighborhoods that you need those to be in. We just had a meeting at. It was for the CDBG grant that we just wrote and we got, we were the only two in the state of Georgia that were awarded housing money this past time and we were one of the two and we got a million dollars.

I:: That's good, to know. So if you were to give advice to a community that's thinking about addressing housing and neighborhood conditions, or just getting started. What would you tell them?

R:: If I were gonna start a new housing group starting like we did not know anything, I would definitely start with a housing assessment. And, let me say that because, when we graduated last September. Six months ago. There were people that started with us, a three year period, that has had still not done the housing assessment. And I thought, how do you know? How you really know what you're working? If we haven't accumulated the data to know which way to go. And so that was, I don't think you can do anything without that. And the urban redevelopment plan does some of that, but it doesn't do door to door.

[Asked a follow-up question in this conversation again about how they use the assessment]

R:: Yeah. Also to make decisions on whether we wanted to do repairs or if wanted to do whole houses and build new houses. We don't have land to build new houses. Not in the city limits. So we use that information and decide whether we want to do one or the other.

**Monroe**

[May be relevant, response to question about advice to new communities]

R:: Not engaging in the conversation is not going to help. I mean just assuming, putting it all in the private market and people who are out there trying to make a living and make money doing housing, leaving in the conversation where those are the only voices in that sector will not get you what, it won't get you the best kind of community. It just won't. So I think you have to engage in the conversation. You have to learn just the basics of- What is your housing stock? What is your median income? What is missing? What is in it? You need to know your community, at a minimum, you need to know your community. And GICH will help you do that.

[This is part of the series of questions about relationships strengthened or formed. For some reason the I/R notations did not appear in the transcript. I’ve added them in here]

R: …Oh and the youth advocacy board. They helped us do our housing survey and. They had a lot of students participate in that.

I: Was that through the nonprofit sector?

R: I mean they're a nonprofit because it's through its students. It's like high school students throughout the county. Like a leadership program.

I; And that was a new partner, new connection or?

R:It existed and we used them as volunteers to partner with us on housing survey.

I: And those are the students who came with on the housing conditions survey when we did it?

R: Yes. Yeah that was a group. They did that then. Yes. Yes. Sorry.

I: So what was the impact of having them on board that you've had because...

R: Well anytime you get youth engaged it expands the conversation. Because all those kids go home and talk to their parents and talk to their friends and they ask questions and I mean it makes honestly it makes people that have the spending power and decision making power to pay more attention. You know if your kid comes home and says I just walk down the street and they live in deplorable conditions.

I: Sometimes people don't ever see that part of the city.

R: You don't have to. You can completely live in a bubble in a community and never see it.

I: How about academic institutions.

R: UGA. That was huge.

I: And that was a new?

R: Yes. Yes.

I: OK. What was the impact of your partnership with UGA.

**R::** It was great. It's way better, we wouldn't have been able to accomplish things. We wouldn't be able to the housing assessment. We wouldn't have had the data or the understanding of the data to be able to have these important conversations at the local level.

[An interesting anecdote]

I:: Is there anything else that I haven't asked that you. Are there any other partnerships or any sort of important things that...

R:: I don't know if it's important. I don't know if it relates. We were also sued during this process for denying a housing development as a rezone, for designing a rezone. But in that process the city, this is a reason why cities should do this, they know obviously the prosecuting attorney is asking for all that housing professionals and data and all this stuff and there isn't anybody. I was the closest thing that they had. So everything. all of my GICH folder, everything I did was entered into evidence in this lawsuit in the process.

I:: So you denied…

R:: It was a rezone for an apartment complex on, some of it was R-1 and some of it was commercial. But it was kind of isolated on the edge of the city. And they denied it. But they might not have used the right language for why they denied it. And so they're being sued basically saying you're being discriminatory you're not allowing this kind of housing in your community, which is not exactly what was going on. I mean it hasn't been ruled on yet. All the depositions have been done. But. That's tough. And. It's like oh now we're also getting punished for trying to make an effort in the housing arena. But. I will say this as having all that GICH data and the clear evidence that we knew our product. We have made incredible efforts to try to be proactive in responding to what is needed in our community and providing for the future growth. And it is real clear that that's not the intent of the...even elected officials may have worded things wrong or spoken out of ignorance. It is clear from all the data and effort for the past three years. That we're not trying to be discriminatory. We're not trying to isolate. And we actually know the data because they were saying you said some census estimates say this but your data shows this. Which one do you think is right? Ours. We went and counted... It's like we had hundreds of volunteers doing it. Our data is right. I mean so that's, it was awful experience but that part of it was. But knowing it, it was real clear in the depositions and all of everything submitted into evidence.

[Direct question about how they use the housing assessment data. They added quite a bit to their dataset, so we should probably mention this. I included her comments about all of their housing data though because it might be of interest to you or useful for the paper. The comments about use of the housing assessment appears later in this section]

R:: We're still using it. For example where were the Young Gamechangers Community for a, it's a program of Georgia for 50 young professionals from all over the state of Georgia, kind of master plan for a community and obviously they keep talking about housing and related to all the things they're looking at. So we're just feeding them all the data that we have. And now we can, I feel like I can answer a couple of things with a comprehensive answer. One is rental rate. And really speaking to that responding to it. What that rental rate means to us in our community.

I:: And you collected that through...

R:: Tax records.

I:: Which is different than census markedly different than the census data.

R:: We went through every tax parcel and if it had a homestead exemption, then that's owner occupied. And then we also went through the ones that were questionable and saw if the mailing address lined up with the...Sometimes, and we know it's on not a foolproof way. But most of the time it's pretty good so it gave us a real rental rate. It gave us real numbers of how many the large landlords have and how much of it is concentrated in certain hands. That's really important information. Then it helped us see help to see that, it just helped us really understand it and also see that a lot of people, a lot more people rent. Period. And there's just been an uptick in rental rates everywhere and we have a lot of really good rental

I:: And so which is a good.

R:: It's a great thing and so just realizing like a blanket "We don't want more rentals". It's not a good enough response. So it helped with that, we still use that data that still comes out and lots of conversations. New projects that have come to the city, we can tell them right out of the gate. Well this is this is who we are, this is what we have. We know we know our numbers. We know. And there's something else you had... How have we used that data.... the rental rate...

I:: So the housing conditions data, you calculated the rental rate and then you get some additional data from the real estate board...

R:: Yes. And we also the condition, the housing assessment that we did from the physical condition, that was good to just show concentrated areas of like where this whole area is a mess. Yeah. So. What are we doing? And the city hasn't really come up with a good answer to that yet. That's what we're still trying to figure out because it's a hard question to answer.

I:: Well that's one that's I think that's one thing we're looking for because we've put a lot of time and energy and resources into developing that housing conditions piece. But it's a little bit harder to see how people really do use it. It may be that it takes time, longer even though it seems like it would be sort of intuitively seems like, we know where the problem is that those fixes would be quicker. But in fact maybe…

R:: Well and one thing that's really good is realizing that a lot of the issues that you see or a lot of the areas that feel very uncared for, a lot of times not a lot, sometimes it has nothing to do with the structure of the house it's really just the maintenance or the habits of the property. And so it's like well wait, this actually, the structure is OK. So what makes it feel unkempt? A lot of times for us in our area, there's not a defined parking area. And so there's not grass and there's not defined parking.

I:: Or no ground cover.

R:: So it feels it feels so much rougher. And even is a solid brick structure that could be a great home. So there's simple things. And so it's like well wait maybe we don't have a housing condition issue in this area. We have like a landscaping issue or we have a there's not curb and gutter. There's no clear sidewalks. So clearly, there's like other things that could be simpler fixes that change the entire feel of a neighborhood. That aren't what we think the issue is.

**Rockmart**

[describe how a resident became involved with the GICH team]

R2:: Well you know I think a Donny McBrian. He wasn't on our original team and he saw that.

R1:: We brought residents in once they've seen and heard about the program. They'd come and attended the GICH meeting. They heard what we were presenting and what was some of the goals were that they bought into it.

R2:: He's helped with the assessment. He helps with the neighborhood cleanups and he lives in the village and he's interested in doing you know us doing a centennial type project.

[Conversation about housing assessments, edited because they strayed off topic for a bit]

I:: It has certainly turned around. So how did you use your housing assessment data? Have you used it?

R2:: We included it in our grant application for the DCA Grant. So we haven't completed the whole city, we just focused on the village. This area over here and the what we call the Westside, which is I mean we've done an inventory of those houses. There are, let me get my numbers right. There are about twenty eight to thirty abandoned structures and 14 to 15 vacant lots in that core area. I mean if we can make a dent in that, that's great achievement.

R1:: The only problem I have you know doing assessments is having an adequate training for those that are doing this.

I:: Yeah we're working on that.

R1:: Okay. Because you know Sherman can walk up and something that would be distasteful or something that he felt like needed to be and another person grew up and not recognize it or see it. And how do you make that assessment accurate, quantifiable and the whole nine years.

I:: And consistent among everyone who does it.

R1:: You know in there so you get a good, true picture of really what's needed or what the community is made up of. I think that creates an obstacle there's got to be dealt with over time.

Madison – Monica’s comments were very insightful, though not part of this paper

[Responding to the advice to new communities question]

R:: To walk their neighborhood with someone from the neighborhood. And to walk through neighborhoods with their eyes open. And then the emphasis on that is walk. There are so many things that gloss over and you pass by in your car everyday and you don't think about it. We don't allow ourselves to think about it. But the act of walking engagement is a different way to experience your community.

R: There's a dual value there. One is the neighborhood sees your physical presence and two, it's a firsthand experience. What I would add about our survey is when we did our condition assessment, that was actually done by staff. And so, and we we did evaluate yards, curb, curb appeal, all kinds of things that we added onto a typical condition assessment. And in addition to that, what I think was useful, is our GICH team was asked to do that walk in a visual survey that wasn't really a condition assessment survey. [This was a follow-up to the data collection to get the GICH team to see the areas]

[About the things you learn while collecting data (and walking through neighborhoods)]

And I'll tell you, more things came out of the neighborhood engagement like that and about public safety. You know, people run through here or people hang out. But those are not necessarily things you see when you're recording physically conditions and property, they told us patterns of behavior. And I think that was useful.