A **Regenerative** Grant Street Existing Conditions Report

SUMMER 2020

- How have rising property values affected Grant Street and the surrounding neighborhood?
- How has the historical practice of redlining continued to impact Grant Street?
- What impact has the refuge and immigrant community had on the growth and development of Grant Street?
Planning Process
Background and Overview

In August of 2019, Preservation Buffalo Niagara was engaged by the offices of New York State Assembly member Sean Ryan and City of Buffalo Common Council Member David Rivera to design and oversee a preservation-based neighborhood planning process for Grant Street.

In the initial organizing for the process, emphasis was placed on supporting existing businesses and residents, creating new pathways of opportunity, and preventing displacement or loss of community identity and control. Final deliverables were planned to be inventories and maps of existing and historic conditions of Grant Street, surveys and research into market data and locally served populations, a community engagement process of in-person meetings, coordinating training from the National Main Street Center for local stakeholder leadership, a storefront matchmaking campaign between landlords of available storefronts and potential tenants, and a final recommendations report.

Even before the COVID-19 crisis hit, planning in this neighborhood was challenging due to its state of rapid change. Intentionality was built in to ensure that changes to the commercial corridor can be understood, and that any recommendations or tools to come from the process would support existing residents by creating new pathways of opportunity, rather than bending toward external economic development “fixes” that can result in displacement and loss of community identity and control.

This Existing Conditions Report is the first deliverable in this process. Through the fall and winter of 2019 and early 2020, PBN staff focused on research, initial community engagement, and the inventoring process to establish a conditions baseline, with plans that were in place to begin much of the community engagement and storefront work in the spring through in-person processes. These plans have shifted in nature as a result of COVID-19 social distancing. In their stead, we have relied more on digital data collection, which is not ideal in a community with a deep digital divide. Therefore, we offer up this Existing Conditions report as a starting place for a process more rooted in in-person engagement when it is safe to do so.
Our focus area is the Grant Street Corridor from West Ferry Street to Forest Avenue. While our primary focus will be on Grant Street itself, it is necessary to contextualize Grant Street within its surrounding residential community. Demographic information was included from the surrounding census tracts.
A Note Regarding 2020

2020 has so far proven to be a challenging year of rapid change. From the adoption of new social practices because of the COVID-19 pandemic, to the related economic crisis, and now the widespread popular uprising against racism and systemic white supremacy, 2020 will be a year of note in all our lives.

Grant Street is no less affected by these changes than anywhere else—as of May 19, the 14213 zip code of the West Side has a 6.3% rate of COVID-19 infections, an above-average rate compared to the rest of Erie County, and a median rate compared to zip codes located within the City of Buffalo. In response to mandated COVID-19 social distancing practices, small businesses on Grant Street rapidly shifted to delivery and curbside practices or closed entirely. On Friday, May 29th a large group of racial justice demonstrators responded to the threat of a kettle (a police tactic where officers contain a crowd within a limited area and then either control the exits or contain and prevent protestors from leaving so that they can make arrests) at Niagara Square by moving from downtown through the city’s West Side, then back downtown, meeting militarized riot police at several intersections, including Grant and Auburn. Four businesses on Grant Street reported damages from the demonstrations.

None of this happened spontaneously. The whole of WNY has awoken to what residents of the City of Buffalo have long known—we need systemic change rooted in justice and equity.

We hope that the Regenerative Grant Street planning process can be one tool in this much larger community pivot point for community members to forge more just, equitable and resilient paths forward. It is in that spirit that we submit this Existing Conditions Report.
Community History

18th - 19th Century Development

Prior to 1792, the city of Buffalo was home to the thriving culture of the People of the Six Nations, the Hau de no sau nee (pronounced ho dee noe sho nee and meaning People Building a Long House), who are sometimes also referred to as the Iroquois Confederacy.

Between 1792 and 1793, a group of Dutch investors, known as the Holland Land Company, purchased 3,250,000 acres of land in what would become Western New York. These investors were crucial to the early European settlement of Western New York and the development of many of the area’s cities and towns. Based in Batavia, New York, the Holland Land Company sold tracts of land to incoming settlers and speculators until 1840, when the company’s holdings were exhausted. By 1846 the Holland Land Company’s affairs had been settled and the company dissolved.

The following historic overview is adapted from the third chapter of the Grant-Ferry- Forest Historic Resource Survey and sums up the commercial development of the West Side and Grant Street during this period.

After expanding its boundaries to incorporate Black Rock, as well [as] the eastern areas of Cold Springs and the Buffalo Plains community, by 1854 Buffalo had grown from roughly four and one-half square miles to more than forty-two square miles. At [the] same time Buffalo was already seated as a major shipping and manufacturing center in the interior United States in large part due to the Erie Canal and associated industrial areas that developed and relied on the waterway. In the years following the Civil War, Buffalo’s role as an industrial center continued to grow with the rapid expansion of railroads, that provided not only access to cross country rail lines but also to smaller inter-city lines, the New York Central Belt Line, and lite rail such as street cars.

In 1884, civil engineers had laid out most of the present-day streets in the survey area, though the initial names of many of these streets differ from their present designations. In 1872 virtually no buildings were standing in the survey area east of Herkimer Street (then called North Jefferson Street), while north of Bird Avenue dwellings had only been erected to the west side of Grant Street.

By the end of the following decade, construction of middle-class housing was proceeding rapidly. “Last week over one hundred applications were made to build frame residences” in the area, reported H. S. Pickett, an observer of the local architectural scene. One of the prominent builders of these houses was Fred
W. Hudson who established his contracting business in 1889 and erected dwellings ranging in cost from $12,000 to $25,000. Another entrepreneur operating in the area was James Mooney & Brother. In 1891, a local newspaper reported the Mooney’s had bought a parcel of land bounded by Hoyt Street, Clinton Avenue, and Bird Avenue and intended to build a number of houses there. In 1893, the real estate section of a local newspaper listed dozens of properties for rent or sale within the survey area; one ad for the F.R. Ormsby & Co. real estate company listed the availability of nine properties alone.

“A good field for investors,” noted the Buffalo Express in 1890, “is in the erection of small dwelling houses at Black Rock . . . Houses can be rented . . . as fast as they can be put up. Large additions are being made daily to Buffalo’s laboring population and houses are needed to accommodate them.” An early resident of Hoyt Street, Henry Allen, likewise noted in his diary that the pace of improvements was speedy. He rejoiced when the main that provided gas lights for houses was completed in 1886; a year later, he expressed his pleasure at news that the first water main had been finished. Happily, residents could now abandon their dependency on wells. Historical maps from the time, show the rapid changes the swiftly built up neighborhood was undergoing.

From the 1890s to the 1900s Grant Street grew into the chief commercial corridor in the western part of the survey area. The petition to create a 60-foot wide street running from Hampshire Street to Scajaquada Creek was approved by the City in February 1864. While it is visible on the 1866 Topographical Atlas of Erie County, Grant Street doesn’t appear in a City Directory index of streets until 1871. The Directory only lists 10 persons/households as residing on Grant Street, all of which have the address of “Grant near Forest”. The following year the 1872 Atlas visually confirms the slow development of Grant Street in these early years. Construction was found primarily on side streets, specifically on Bird, Pooley and Forest, with Grant Street itself relatively underdeveloped with undivided, block-size parcels.

Twenty years later, as shown in the 1891 Atlas, many of the large parcels had been subdivided, with increased development occurring on the southern end between West Ferry Street and Lafayette Avenue, but overall development of Grant Street was still slow. Ground floor shops with apartments above—so-called “mom and pop” stores—set the pattern for early commercial development along Grant Street, including at 212 Grant Street (c. 1895) and 83 Grant Street (c. 1896). While there are pockets of commercial development on Niagara Street, West Ferry Avenue, and Forest Avenue, and corner stores throughout the greater neighborhood, it is during this period that Grant begins its progress toward being the primary commercial corridor in the western portion of the survey area, just as Elmwood was the commercial corridor for the eastern portion.

It was during this time period that Grant Street began its current pattern of growth as a vibrant neighborhood commercial hub of the West Side, allowing successive waves of immigrants to build both homes and businesses, directly serving the community and building wealth from the inside out.
Like much of the City of Buffalo, population on the West Side increased rapidly during the first half of the 20th century; census records show that the city population more than doubled in the fifty years between 1890 and 1940, from 255,664 to 575,901. If Grant Street ever truly experienced a “golden age” of growth as residents nostalgically reminisce, it would have been in this era. Of note, Buffalo State College, which opened in 1871 at what is today Grover Cleveland High School at Jersey Street and Normal Avenue, held its groundbreaking at its current Grant Street location in 1928.4 In the book City on the Lake author Mark Goldman briefly mentions some of the noteworthy businesses that likely opened in this period that are no longer extant—Russ’s Pastries, Spasiano’s Cleaners, and Licata’s Sausage. A business directory from 1902 lists a wide variety of businesses active at that time— at 65 Grant Street, both James Simpson, shoemaker, and Thomas Creighton, undertaker, ran their businesses next to The Mistletoe Club. Several independent businesses that continued into 2020 also opened in this long era of growth, including G&L Flooring (1943), Rotundo’s Laundry (1947), Dibble’s True Value Hardware (1950), and Nick’s Barbershop (circa 1950).5 6

While this was an era of relative economic prosperity and population growth, it is worth keeping in mind that conflicts also arose in the West Side with this growth, particularly during the Prohibition period— in short, this was not a time unmarked by tensions. This was also the era when redlining and other forms of institutionalized discrimination arose in housing and development policy, coming as part of broader New Deal responses to the Great Depression. After the collapse of the economy during the Great Depression, the federal government intervened in the mortgage market to underwrite home loans, shifting development patterns to the suburbs and majority-white parts of town, while also establishing many of the foundational rules and regulations that our modern economy is built upon.

Figure 1.1 - Business Directory Entries, 1910
Figure 1.2 - FHA WWII poster
Figure 1.3 - USHA poster
(public domain)
In 1937 much of the City of Buffalo, including Grant Street and surrounding neighborhoods, were designated “third grade” or “definitely declining” property by the Home Owner's Loan Corporation—the second-worst designation, which restricted loan funds in these areas. The HOLC noted that that the West Side was home to “An older section of workingmen's homes varying from singles to multi-family”, with “Accessibility to places of employment, center of city, etc., according to location in area” and a “Large foreign population, old buildings and overcrowding.” In short, many of the attributes we today recognize as positive qualities were at the time federally designated as negative, institutionalizing prejudice into the system and affecting intergenerational family wealth growth nationally over the next century.

By 1958, planners who drafted the “Future of Buffalo” community development report noted that the entirety of the Grant Street neighborhood had housing that was in either “below average” or “deteriorated” in condition.

In that same report, planners wrote passages about what we now recognize as unchecked suburban sprawl and the need even then for a strong regional planning approach to support the city core and protect surrounding farmland and wilderness spaces. White flight had by this time begun in earnest, partially spurred by the aforementioned redlining practices.

The City of Buffalo’s population had increased from 1940 to 1950 by less than 1% while the urbanizing ring around the city had increased in that same period by 33.1%. By this date the urban fringe already contained a population nearly half in size that of the central city. Moreover, whereas Buffalo’s area is only 61.6 square miles, the urban fringe had exploded into a ring of some 1548 square miles. Population per square mile for the central city was 14724 persons while within the urban fringe it was only 3538.
Like many planners, engineers and designers of the day, these planners, concerned about the potential negative impacts that this growth pattern could have on city residents, figured the only way to compete with the suburbs was to emulate suburban development patterns, and promoted the idea of automotive-based lifestyles and larger household footprints. Of note, they dedicated a large portion of their report to the promotion of shopping plazas built around parking lots; of the need to serve the “daylong continued shopping activities of women, particularly of the housewife”, and of the “rapidly approaching two-car per family status in the American City.”

What Buffalo lacks and what is lacking in most of the older shopping areas of the central business districts of all of our major cities is the congenial atmosphere of the marketplace. The sidewalk on Main Street is not adequate to provide the type of atmosphere which popularizes the shopping requirements of today’s housewife. The central business district of Buffalo, if it is to retain and develop the retail shopping portion of its function, must take another look at its design and character. It is clear that a plan must be developed for this area which will take advantage not only of its traditional location but also of the requirements and needs of today’s shopper and tomorrow’s shopper.

In short, planners, engineers and designers at this time made deliberate decisions that helped shape the modern development of our city with practices steeped in a new suburban typology, which in turn had been born of state-sanctioned and institutionalized racism.

Paul Murphy, third-generation owner of G&L Flooring, reminisces about Grant Street during this period in this passage from recent coverage in the Buffalo News.

Murphy, 64, remembers a very different Grant Street growing up in the late 1950s and 1960s.11

A shopper could go to Simon’s or Phillip & Son for full-line men’s clothing, and women could get fashionable clothes at Gutman’s Women’s Wear and Lora Lee Dress Shop. Thom McAn, Buster Brown, Liberty and Rudolph’s sold shoes on Grant. Orville’s Appliances had its first store on Grant.

There were Texaco and Mobil gas stations, neighborhood restaurants and bars and two movie theaters – the Victoria at Grant and West Ferry, and the Ellen Terry at Grant and Potomac.

“There were a lot more viable businesses,” Murphy said. “You could get anything you wanted.”

“But the neighborhood went through wrenching changes, as workers lost their jobs at steel mills and auto plants and businesses closed or relocated. Homeowners left for North Buffalo and the suburbs, often replaced by absentee landlords. As the middle class moved out, poverty moved in.”

The closure of the steel mills and the auto plants was certainly a major driver of economic conditions in Western New York in the second half of the 20th century, but when looking specifically at the shift in the conditions of Grant Street during this period, it is important to not omit other significant contributing factors, such as redlining and increased government subsidy of suburbanization and car culture.

In the 1960s and 1970s, growth and change continued on Grant Street, with a number of neighborhood institutions opening their doors, including Guercio and Sons in 1961, Frontier Liquor in 1972, and Royal Printing by 1979 (NYS LLC date 1979; “opened after Korean War”).14
In 1967, frustration over decades of racially-motivated discriminatory practices spilled over and a series of civil uprisings erupted across the city. On the West Side, these demonstrations were within the Lakeview and Allentown areas, which had been more directly targeted for urban renewal than Grant Street and the upper West Side. The election of President Nixon in 1968 cemented a regressive “hard on crime” federal policy approach, with the launch of the War on Drugs in 1971, with President Nixon declaring drug use “public enemy number 1.” During this same period, many of the “Great Society” reforms of the previous decade were systemically dismantled or strongly watered down. Policies locally and nationally that started with this shift, and the related shifts in city budgets to increase funding for police, would greatly influence municipal politics for decades to come.

By April 1977, area residents of Grant Street voiced strong frustrations with the lack of government investment in infrastructure and programs.

“...the streets are littered with beer cans and debris and the neighborhood has more than its share of dilapidated houses, vacant land, rats and roaches... if the city can get us frustrated enough to move, the area will probably be turned over to a private developer,” stated Frank Villanueva, president of the Spanish American Alliance at 254 Virginia Street.

He spoke about the conditions on the lower West Side, in particular the conditions in neighborhoods with large Puerto Rican populations, but these frustrations were shared by residents of Grant Street. That same month, the West Side Business and Taxpayer Association worked with federal officials and neighborhood stakeholders to secure funding for the West Side Civic Center and sidewalk amenities; the Off-Track Betting Center sponsored the purchase of a sidewalk sweeper that would clean the walkways along Grant Street from Ferry to Auburn. Area non-profits, like West Side Neighborhood Housing Services (founded 1980) began to step into the role of advocacy and community development in earnest in response to this lack of systemic investment.

By 1981 the demographics of the West Side had shifted, continuing the same patterns of suburban white flight.

The West Side today is possibly the most changing and the most changed of all Buffalo neighborhoods. Near its northern end, congregants pack Lafayette Street to attend the Assembleas de Dion church, once called Grace Episcopal.

Around the corner on Grant Street, Guercio and Sons grocers do a brisk trade in Pastificio del Verde pasta from Italy. John, Sammy, Louie, Charlie, Tom and Santino Guercio run the place for their father, Vincent. Their alma mater is Lafayette High. Their bar is a local joint called Hoppers.

Figure 1.6 - VISTA magazine - Buffalo Uprising 1967
(https://www.vistacampus.gov/sites/vistacampus/files/timeline/vtl_Buffalo_Riots.jpg)
By 1957, the Lower West Side had long been known as “Little Italy” and Niagara Street was its hub. Many of the Irish had moved north: first past Porter and eventually past Forest Avenue into North Buffalo and the suburbs.

The Italians inherited the commercial strips along Connecticut Street and in the Grant-Ferry District. The Italian West Side stretched from Richmond Avenue – where Buffalo’s aristocrats had donned sealskin caps, mittens and boots at the turn of the century for horse and cutter races up and down the thoroughfare – to the Niagara River.

Today the whole process seems to be repeating itself. Hispanic Buffalonians, who now make up 20 percent of “Little Italy’s” population, are moving slowly west along the river, then north. And as Frank Tagliarino observes, many ex-West Side Italians have moved north to Hertel Avenue and beyond.15

Through 1990, the cycle of systemic disinvestment and existing issues continued. As City of Buffalo Director of Neighborhoods Jay Duderwick explained to members of the Plymouth Avenue Block Club in 1998, “The city is suffering three abandoned houses a day, about 100 a month. Owners are simply walking away from houses that no longer have economic value.”16

Rates of violent crime nationwide reached a peak in the early 1990s, then started a sharp decline, while police budgets and rates of incarceration continued to rise.17 In Buffalo, a firebombing of the home of Betty and Anthony Serio in 1998 spurred the formation of this block club:

The publicity surrounding the firebombing acted as a catalyst for the long-struggling neighborhood to organize a block club covering two blocks of Plymouth (Vermont to Massachusetts) and a block of Rhode Island, Normal and Vermont. Calling themselves (according to the names of their streets) the PRNV Block Club, they called a public meeting on Thursday, July 30, which Police Commissioner Diina and Commissioner Ryan promised to attend. Instead, they sent subordinates who – in a scenario rehearsed at countless other neighborhood meetings – announced new initiatives against crime and urban blight. Earlier in the day, neighborhood vacant lots had been mowed, but since trash was chopped by the mowers rather than picked up, city caretakers simply replaced one eyesore with another.

New block club leaders in a neglected neighborhood were relieved by the interest of TV news teams. Key Bank presented the Serios with a check for $1000, which the Serios said would be used to start a neighborhood fund. Sam [Ciccia], owner of Chi Chi Rentals on Grant Street, volunteered free use of equipment for neighborhood projects. As some residents pointed out, however, the real problem was never really addressed. A few neighborhood leaders expressed their confidence that the police have the drug problem under control, and the matter was left at that... [But] our drug policy turns large groups of citizens against one another while introducing a crisis of values that threatens to tear the very fabric of our society. On Plymouth Avenue, the public response has consisted of an increased police presence that is intimidating and reassuring at the same time. During a recent Saturday morning visit, [reporter Dick Kern] saw five police cars speed down the street, lights flashing; minutes later, ten officers had three youths against a wall at West and Rhode Island.... In spite of all this activity, the Serios express no interest in offers to repair their house. At the urging of their four adult children, who live outside the city, the Serios will add themselves to the list of responsible citizens fleeing the city.18

While city officials turned their attention to drug policy, the underlying issues of racism and systemic discriminatory practices continued. In October 1995, Antonia Ippolito, a resident of the West Side and a landlord for twelve apartments in the Grant-Ferry neighborhood, came under threat from another area resident, James Ziebold, for renting to Black and Puerto Rican tenants19. After she reached out to Housing Opportunities Made Equal, her case wound its way upward through civil and criminal courts to eventually become part of a larger crackdown by Housing and Urban Development on housing discrimination nationwide. $15 million dollars in related grant funding was provided for housing non-profits nationwide to promote fair housing practices.

Despite all this, during the 1990s the West Side became a popular area for national refugee resettlement programs, partially in recognition of its now-established history as a home for new Americans.20,21 In 1997, Dr. Myron and Joyce Glick opened the doors to the Jericho Road Community Health Center at 184 Barton Street, which quickly established itself as a community hub for the resurgent and growing refugee and immigrant population of the West Side.22 In 2002, the
Office of Refugee Resettlement designated Buffalo as a “Preferred Community”, a place with “a history of low welfare utilization and a favorable earned income potential relative to the cost of living” for resettlement.\(^2^3\)

In the 2000s, grassroots organizational advocacy by West Side residents kicked into high gear, following a large scale neighborhood planning effort known as the West Side Community Planning Collaborative. Eric Walker and Aaron Bartley founded PUSH Buffalo in 2005, knocking on doors and plastering pictures of then-Governor George Pataki on vacant State-owned houses. In the Erie County Red-Green Budget Crisis, libraries and community spaces were shuttered countywide, including the heavily utilized Grant Street Branch. With a push from West Side advocates, the City of Buffalo began leasing the closed Grant Street Library to PUSH and the Massachusetts Avenue Project (MAP) as a non-profit incubator, now redubbed the Grant Street Neighborhood Center.\(^2^4\) Harvey Garrett, as a board member of West Side Neighborhood Housing Services and a founding member of the West Side Collaborative, also helped spur advocacy and investment in West Side housing through a focused block-by-block approach within the boundaries of Porter, Niagara, West Ferry and Richmond—and ruffled a few feathers at City Hall in the process, losing his seat on the WSNHS board in 2008 in a controversial membership vote in which the mayor’s office was accused of stacking the vote.\(^2^5^2^6\) PUSH’s Green Development Zone, also kicked off in 2008, shares many of the same boundaries as the earlier block-by-block initiative and the neighborhood has benefited greatly from this continued focus.\(^2^7\)

Westminster Economic Development Initiative, or WEDI, opened their offices in 2006, with the West Side Bazaar following a few years later near Grant and Lafayette. WEDI is one of just a handful of Community Development Financial Institutions in WNY and has quietly supported the startup and/or the expansion of more than 100 small businesses since 2013 alone, the majority of which are minority or women-owned.\(^2^8\) In 2007, the for-sale sign on a commercial building at Lafayette and Grant caught the eye of Prish Moran, and two years later Sweet_ness 7 Café opened, with three small affordable storefronts.\(^2^9\) These new community institutions thrived aside existing longstanding institutions like Guercio and Sons and Lorigo’s Meating Place, embracing the formerly maligned reputation as an eclectic mix of diverse ethnicities, races and incomes.\(^3^0\) In 2012, Governor Cuomo announced the “Buffalo Billion” initiative, and several Grant

Street businesses and developers have since benefited from funding opened through related programs, such as HES Properties, Westminster Economic Development Initiative, Buffalo Neighborhood Stabilization Company, and Heart of the City Neighborhoods, each sponsoring new construction and rehabilitation projects throughout the corridor.\(^3^1\) In 2015, Assembly member Sean Ryan opened his office at 65 Grant Street, a large commercial building that only a few years prior had been threatened with demolition through neglect and which was largely saved through grassroots neighborhood preservation advocacy efforts.\(^3^2^3^3\) In early 2020, just prior to the COVID-19 crisis, the Buffalo Cooperative Federal Credit Union and Good Neighbors Federal Credit Unions merged and opened a combined branch at 251 Grant Street, a previously long-vacant mixed-use building.\(^3^4^3^5\)

In short, the West Side has more or less retained many of the same characteristics through the past century of development—working-class families, often new Americans, who purchase homes and start businesses, seeking to build intergenerational wealth and build community with neighbors. Unfortunately, many of the institutional and discriminatory factors holding the community back have also been retained.
Our analysis of the existing community demographics includes data from several sources, including census data for tracts on the West Side for the years 2010-2017 (2018 for census income data) and HUD data - see Appendix XX for more details.

The tracts examined were 61, 62.01 (i.e., Buffalo State College), 63.01, 65.01, 66.01, 69.01 and 171. The commercial corridor of Grant Street runs through tracts 61 and 171 so these two tracts were looked at more in-depth. Tract 61 includes the lower portion of the Grant Street commercial corridor, from the southern gateway intersection at Hampshire, Arkansas and Grant north to West Delevan; tract 171 includes the upper portion of Grant Street, from the corner of West Delevan to the Scajaqueda Expressway.
Unlike the City as a whole, which has decreased very slightly in population, shifting from approximately 261,310 in 2010 to 255,284 in 2019 (a -2.3% change), the West Side’s overall population is up very slightly from 2010, by an overall count of 499 people or 2%.

There are a few tracts where population count has changed by more than 500 residents from 2010-2017; these are tracts 61, 66.01 and 171. Tract 61 gained 676 residents and 171 gained 875; 66.01 lost 508 residents.

If we take the total population of all these tracts and lump them together as a single population count, the trend indicates that after a sharp decrease and then increase in the early part of the decade, population has more or less remained about the same since 2014.

Focusing in on the two tracts where the main portion of the Grant Street commercial corridor runs, a clear pattern of population growth emerges. Total population in both of these tracts increased by 1551 residents from 2010 to 2017: by 676 residents in tract 61, and by 875 residents in tract 171. So, in sum, the population for the neighborhood immediately surrounding Grant Street is increasing, at a greater rate than the rest of the West Side, and much more so than the City as a whole.

In both 2010 and 2017, the largest overall populations were the 25-34 age brackets, with 3870 residents who were 25-34 in 2010 and 5373 residents who were 25-34 in 2017. If we lump everyone 0-34 together in one bracket and everyone 35 and older into another, data indicates that the West Side is shifting towards a younger population, with an increase of 1205 residents 34 and younger between 2010 and 2017 and a decrease of 706 residents 35 and older in the same period.

Focusing in on tracts 61 and 171, this pattern is even clearer, with an increase of 931 or 83% in the number of residents 25-34. In 2017 there were 899 more children ages 14 and under in these two tracts.

Unlike the City as a whole, which has continued to experience a population decline, the West Side has experienced an increase in population of about 2% between 2010 and 2017.
versus in 2010. To contrast, there were 407 fewer residents ages 35 and older in 2017 versus in 2010. For a citywide 2010-2017 comparison, there was a small increase of 7,459 people ages 34 and younger and a small decrease of 4,145 people 34 and older, and the median citywide age trended slightly younger, from 40 to 39.5 years of age.

These trends may indicate an increase in young families starting to have children as elders age into other housing that better meets their physical needs, but could indicate other possible shifts, such as elders leaving WNY for warmer climates.

While the West Side has traditionally been among the most diverse areas of Western New York, recent trends seem to show it becoming overall somewhat more homogenous. The largest increase between 2010 and 2017 in self-reported racial demographic data in raw numbers in the combined West Side tracts is folks who identify as white and one race, at an overall increase of 2736 people. The number of people who identify as Black and one race decreased by 1033, and the number of people who identify as Asian and one race decreased by 1417. The number of people who identify as a member of a First Nation increased by 196 and the number of people who identify as two or more races increased by 470.

If we look at the shifts based on percentage instead of raw numbers, then this indicates a 22% increase of people who identify as white, a 166% increase of people who identify as members of First Nations, and a 39% increase of people who identify as two or more races. This also indicates decreases by 19% of people who identify as Black and 45% of people who identify as Asian.

Examining tracts 61 and 171 specifically, there are 1245 more people who identify as white (39% increase), 86 more people who identify as members of First Nations (215% increase), and 487 more people identify as belonging to two or more races (104% increase) in 2017 versus in 2010. 978 fewer people identify as Asian (67% decrease), and 783 fewer people identify as Black (25% decrease).

However, while it is clear that there is a trend towards a larger proportion of people who identify as white in these tracts, it is also very important to remember some people who identify as white also identify as Hispanic or Latino. There has overall been an increase in the number of people in tracts 61 and 171 who identify with these ethnicities.
totaling 1551 more people or an increase of 18%. There has likewise been an increase of 18% in the number of people who do not identify as either Hispanic or Latino, 1165 people total; the impact has been largely negligible in proportional percentage, with a 2% decrease in the number of people who identify as Hispanic or Latino in tract 61 but a 2% increase in tract 171.

In sum, while clearly there has been an increase in the number of people who identify as white and one race as the population has increased in overall size, there has not been much of a shift in the majority number of people who identify as Hispanic or Latino, and there has been a clear increase as well in the number of people identifying with two or more races.

This may indicate that although there are fewer people who identify as Black or Asian who lived in these tracts in 2017 versus in 2010, there are also more people who do not conform to standardized “check a box” categorization, indicating that identities of many west side residents are growing beyond census categorizations, which is reflective of the overall nationwide shift towards greater racial and ethnic diversity in younger generations.26

There is also a clear shift towards a younger population, and this may indicate an increase in the number of families with young children starting homes on the West Side.

**Neighborhood Housing Opportunities and Issues**

We conducted an examination of housing values in the census data for tracts 61 and 171 and found that there has been a sharp spike between 2017 and 2010.

In 2010, in both tracts 61 and 171, the majority of homes were valued at less than $50,000. By 2017, the majority were valued at between $50,000 and $99,999. By 2017, some homes (2% in tract 61, 5% in tract 171) were valued at between $500,000 and $99,999, whereas in 2010 the highest-valued homes in tract 61 were the 2% valued between $300,000 and $499,999, and in tract 171 the 8% valued between $100,000 and $149,999.

To determine the causes of these increased values and what impact that increase might have on local household budgets, we compared census data for tracts 61 and 171 in 2010 and 2018, specifically looking at rent, income, and Gross Rent as a Percentage of Income (GRAPI).

Overall median income in tracts 61 and 171 has
increased from 2010 to 2018, from $18,949 to $32,646 in tract 61, and from $19,188 to $25,972 in tract 171. As comparative baselines, according to the census the median household income in 2014 in Erie County (in 2018 dollars) was $55,673. The Department of Health and Human Services listed the 2010 national poverty line for a single-person household as $10,830, and as $12,140 for 2018. For a two-person household in 2010, the poverty line was $14,570, and for 2018 it was $16,460.

In 2010, 33% of households in tract 61 and 27% of households in tract 171 earned less than $10,000 a year, and over half (59% for both tracts) earned less than $25,000. By 2017, about 13% of households in tract 61 and 171 were earning less than $10,000, and in tract 61, 41% earned less than $25,000; for tract 171, the number was 51%.

Breaking this information down to income brackets, the data shows an increase in the proportion of people earning over $25,000 in both tracts as the proportion of people earning below $25,000 fell.

As incomes and housing values rose during this time period, gross rent also rose, with the greatest increase in the number of properties renting for between $500 and $999 a month (from 73% to 80% in tract 61, and 62% to 81% in tract 171). The greatest decrease was in rentals under $500 (from 21% to 8% in tract 61, and 28% to 4% in tract 171.) The percentage of rentals above $1,000 rose from 6% to 11% in tract 61 and from 10% to 15% in tract 171.

Overall, median rent rose from $644 to $792 in tract 61 (23% increase) and from $695 to $756 in tract 171 (9% increase). For comparison, median rents citywide increased 8%, indicating that the median rent in these two tracts is increasing faster than the median rents in the rest of the city.37

However, due to the changes in the median household income proportions in these tracts, even as gross rent rates have increased, it has paradoxically become more affordable for residents based on household incomes—although the majority of households in both tracts 61 and 171 are paying unaffordable rents.

HUD measures “affordable” rent as 30% or less of household income. In 2010, even though rents were much lower in tracts 61 and 171, because the
median household income was also so low at that time, a smaller proportion of people in those tracts reported their GRAPI as greater than 30% of their household income in 2017 versus 2010. In tract 61, 71% of households reported GRAPI above 30% in 2010, which dropped to 58% in 2017. In tract 171, 69% reported GRAPI above 30% in 2010, which rose to 64% in 2017.

In sum, the median income has increased as has housing expenses, but the median income is increasing faster which means that while for the majority, rent is becoming more affordable, it is still unaffordable.

Additionally, although the increase in household incomes is not being felt evenly among everyone, housing expense increases are being felt by all households. This increase in median rent prices is disproportionately squeezing the household budgets of those who have less income.

It is not merely due to the increase in median income that housing expenses have risen. Housing vacancy has decreased in tracts 61 and 171 from 2010 to 2017, but remains higher than 20% in both tracts, which indicates a rate of “hypervacancy” as defined by the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy. 38

Census Tracts 61 and 171 experienced a decrease in the number of vacant homes between 2010 and 2017, though both still have a vacancy rate over 20%.
As a result of a policy of citywide demolitions to try to address this issue, based on census data from 2010 to 2017, tract 61 has lost 161 housing units, and tract 171 lost 189. However, these demolitions have not addressed the number of units with substandard housing quality.

The census measures “incomplete plumbing facilities” as households that lack at least one of the following:

1) Hot and cold running water
2) A flush toilet
3) A bathtub or shower

“Incomplete kitchen facilities” means households that lack at least one of these:

1) A sink with a faucet
2) A stove or range
3) A refrigerator

In 2010, tract 61 had 9 households without complete kitchens and 0 without complete plumbing; in 2017, after 161 demolitions, 67 households lacked complete kitchens and 15 lacked complete plumbing. In tract 171 in 2010, 56 households lacked complete kitchens, and 9 lacked complete plumbing; in 2017, after 189 demolitions, 24 lacked complete kitchens and 0 lacked complete plumbing.

Based on census data, the overall housing occupancy rate remained about the same for both tracts 61 and 171 between 2010 and 2017, and both owner-occupant and renter households are moving less. However, there has been a decrease in the number of new homeowners purchasing homes in these tracts (as shown by a decrease in householders of less than 10 years between 2010 and 2017) – in short, residents are remaining in place, and fewer new long term home purchasers are settling in these two tracts.

According to HUD data, which is only available for tract 61 for 2010 and 2017, there has been a decrease in households that rely on vouchers, and those that receive vouchers must wait longer for one.

Average household size has increased in tracts 61 and 171 since 2010. This may be due to the increase in families that have children living with them at home, but it could also be indicative of larger mixed households sharing flats, especially young adults. In 2010, only 2% of tract 61 residents lived in a dwelling with more than one occupant per room, but by 2017, this had increased to 7%. In tract 171, 6% lived in a dwelling with more than one occupant per room in 2010, and by 2017, this had increased to 8%.

In sum, population of the areas directly surrounding Grant Street is trending younger, with a growing youth population who should be taken into consideration as we think about development and needed infrastructure improvements. The population is growing, and housing costs are increasing, which is a combination that may lead to potential displacement of current residents as the market tightens.
Shifting away from population data from the census and HUD to instead examine the impact on land and property use, we looked at tax records for Grant Street-facing properties and matched that information to shared business mailing addresses and conducted a windshield survey to see what the properties that are not being used for dwellings are being used for.

**Important note about the following data and COVID-19 impacts**

The data presented in this section is based on a mix of Erie County tax records for 2018-2019, a comprehensive windshield survey conducted in November 2019, and West Side Business and Taxpayer Association membership as of March 2020. As such, this data is a snapshot of the pre-COVID-19 land use and development patterns as opposed to the current environment. While much remains the same today as it always has on Grant Street, in just these past six months since 2020 started we have already seen several businesses close either temporarily or permanently. As more planning and recommendations are undertaken in the future, it will be necessary to re-visit this data.

**Land Use Patterns**

After simplifying categories, we found that about 64% of Grant Street properties are actively in use as residential (34%) or commercial space (30%), about 9% are being used as parking lots, and 25% are vacant. The remaining 2% are used for green space.
By and large the biggest commercial uses were parking, vacancy, and small grocers (defined here as retail stores that sell food as the primary source of income, mostly consisting of traditional-style grocers like Vinetta International Grocery or Guercio and Sons, but also including some corner stores like Bill's.) Vacancy includes not only available storefronts (“non-legacy vacancies”) but also vacant lots, as well as storefronts presently not in operation or not yet available for rent. The latter often occurs due to the need for extensive repairs after decades of building vacancy, or due to the closure of a legacy business without succession plans, which leaves much of the storefront space still filled with the equipment and stock of the previous business (“legacy vacancies”).

Unfortunately, only a small portion of vacant commercial spaces on Grant Street are readily available for rent. Of the businesses in operation, the majority are locally-owned and independent. The majority of these businesses are not presently members of the West Side Business and Taxpayer Association.

Most properties on Grant Street are owned by landlords who maintain two or more properties and are not owner-occupants. Some are maintained by estates of residents who have recently passed on, such as Samuel Ciccia, who ran Chi Chi’s Tool Rental.

Of the 230 properties facing Grant Street that were surveyed, 145 were owned by multiple property owners. Of that 145, Greenleaf Properties owns and maintains the largest share, 34, under a number of LLC names, including “Elmwood Village Contracting”, “James Toolen LLC”, and “Bflo Westside Properties LLC.”

The majority of Greenleaf’s properties are vacant lots, and almost all are concentrated just off the Buffalo State College campus.
As mentioned above, many of the currently-vacant properties were former legacy businesses that closed, sometimes very abruptly, due to owner retirement without succession plans. From late 2019 through the time of this writing in summer 2020, several community institutions, such as Rotundo’s Laundry, Nick’s Barber Shop, Guercio and Sons, and Sweetness 7, announced their intentions to sell or close, or abruptly closed without prior notice. Some of these decisions were possibly a result of illnesses related to COVID-19 or due to the related economic fallout, but most were coincidental planned retirements.

In addition to these closures, other small businesses on Grant Street are under threat of closure due to the economic fallout from COVID-19, and all are under greater pressures due to needed social distancing changes.

Some businesses transitioned ably to the new social distancing practices, such as Dibble’s True Value Hardware, vendors at the West Side Bazaar, Guercio and Sons, Freddy J’s BBQ, and Gather and Game—these businesses shifted to curbside or delivery models and used social media and neighborhood word-of-mouth to share information about the new practices.

Most businesses have remained open through the crisis, but there have been several closures or transitions in ownership. Most notably, Westside Stories announced closure and a liquidation sale, but a couple then approached the owner asking to purchase the business. Long term plans for whether they intend to keep business on Grant Street have not yet been announced.

Amid this period of stress, several businesses suffered damages from the civil unrest on May 29th. These damages were largely limited to shattered windows on the odd-side of the 110-125 block of Grant Street. Frontier Liquor notably reported looting during the uprising and experienced the greatest damage.

What was not discussed as much in news coverage was the impact in the following days of the remnants of police riot unit controls. Flash bang grenades and pepper spray were employed during the demonstration, and both had detrimental impacts on area residents both physically and psychologically.

Also not reported much is that just days later, on June 2nd, a very strong thunderstorm swept through WNY, and the West Side suffered from widespread flash floods, including on Grant Street. Comparatively, the damage to businesses and street infrastructure from flash flooding was far more extensive than damage from the protests.
Despite the extensive history of Grant Street and the many extant structures dating over 100 years old in this commercial corridor, very few Grant Street-facing properties actually qualify as eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. These include 185 Grant, 212 Grant, and 285 Grant. This is likely due to the working-class history of much of this neighborhood—maintenance steps that low-income homeowners and property owners have made have stripped properties of much of the physical integrity that the National Register currently requires. For example, properties where original porch columns have been replaced with wrought iron, or where historic windows have been replaced with modern vinyl windows.

This is not to say that these are not historic buildings, and the building owners clearly care a great deal for their homes – but many lack the resources for restoration, and the local funding pools available for restoration work, especially for lower income property owners, are limited.

Local landmarking of notable individual buildings such as the Glendale Building at 74 Grant Street or the establishment of a local historic district could add protection for properties like these that might not meet the criteria for listing in the National Register. Without any historic protection, these buildings are under threat of potential demolition, which would increase rental prices and strip the commercial district of some of its strongest assets: its unique historic character, and its small scale, which translates into affordability for small business owners.
Local landmarking could also possibly open up funding pools for building owners to help them maintain or improve their properties; they could even possibly become eligible for the National Register after appropriate restoration work is conducted.

One of the structures that has been determined eligible for the National Register, 185 Grant Street, is set to receive funding for façade improvements through the NYS Buffalo Main Street fund. In the Grant-Ferry-Forest Neighborhood Survey, 185 Grant Street is highlighted as a building “Built as a warehouse for Oscar E. Goldhagen” that “is a good representative example a five-story, flat roofed with parapet, urban, brick commercial/industrial building with subtle styling and noted detail work.” Today the ground floor is home to Lorigo’s Meating Place, a small business and community institution opened in 1986, with storage above.

188 Grant Street is likewise a notable historic structure, with over 100 years of businesses and families who have lived in the structure. Today it is home to Jomow International Market, a small independent grocer that caters to the Somali community. However, 188 Grant Street is likely not currently eligible for listing in the National Register due to façade changes made throughout the years. The bones of the structure remain relatively intact, but the exterior now has modern alterations. These changes were made to help maintain the building to city code, but negatively impact eligibility for the National Register. 472 Grant Street, likewise, has a rich history, and most recently was home to Grant International Market, another small grocer. In 2014, a series of arsons on the West Side tore through several structures, and 472 suffered the greatest damage. The owner of the building and the grocery store suffered a large personal financial setback as a result and has for the past six years worked to restore the structure.
More information on street conditions as well as traffic and transportation will be found in the project’s sister effort, a transportation planning effort led by Go Bike Buffalo.

However, in the context of community-based economic development, and especially due to the current COVID-19 public health crisis, it is important to note that Grant Street at present is not a physically healthy space. Years of deferred maintenance and lack of city sanitation have left the street filled with dirt and debris, which clogs gutters and causes the strained combined sewers to overflow. When dry, it creates a haze of dust and debris, which area residents then breathe in. “Road dirt” or “road dust”, which comes from wear to tires, clutches, brakes and asphalt, can contain a large range of toxic metals, such as cadmium, lead and arsenic.\(^49\) Even without the inclusion of these metals, fine dust particulates contribute to higher rates of respiratory conditions such as asthma, and zip code 14213 has an asthma rate of 141.5 per 10,000 residents, almost three times the average for Erie County (56 per 10,000.\(^{50}\) This higher asthma rate is of further concern within the context of increased risks of respiratory conditions related to COVID-19.

Similarly, the street’s pedestrian infrastructure, such as benches, tree boxes and garbage receptacles, are poorly maintained or lacking entirely. The lack of public garbage receptacles is especially of concern in the current public health context.

The past and current desire by residents and business owners to help maintain the street’s infrastructure is evident, but without assistance and investment from municipal bodies, proper maintenance remains out of reach for the general populace.
Psychologically, this all contributes to some understandably negative perceptions of the commercial corridor, reflected in preliminary survey results of residents and stakeholders. As much as respondents express strong feelings of attachment and appreciation for the neighborhood, they also express feelings of abandonment or neglect of the district—a sense of lawlessness.

Lawless does not mean unpolicéd; a large number of initial survey respondents, in fact, report feeling overpoliced in submitted comments. This comes despite several violent incidents on or near Grant Street in recent years, including a double shooting at Grant and Breckenridge in 2017 in which a 13-year-old girl was shot and injured.

The reports of feeling overpoliced reflect a feeling that laws are not evenly enforced, that police are of little help addressing issues of crime (or worse, that they decrease community safety), of unjust practices and a need for systemic change after decades of inequities.

Despite the above-mentioned incidents, Buffalo has actually been following the national trend of a decrease in violent crime—from a peak rate of 1121.4 per 100,000 in 1994, to a rate of 1019.25 per 100,000 (10,708 incidents) in 2019. This shift is not reflected in budgetary priorities—by its own reporting, since at least 2007 Buffalo has held the police budget steady with the same percentage of spending in the municipal budget general fund appropriations, about 22%. In contrast, the Fire Department portion has fallen from 17% to 14%, and the “Miscellaneous” portion of the budget has fallen from 10% to 6.5%.

In just the past three years, four men have been killed by police interactions on the West Side: Marcus Neal, Rafael “Pito” Rivera, and Jose Hernandez-Rossy from police shootings, and Wardel “Meech” Davis from an asthma attack brought on by a police chase. All of these incidents occurred within a short walking distance of Grant Street; Meech’s memorial is one block off of Grant Street at Hoyt and Arnold.

Community and municipal relationships, particularly community and police relationships, are highly strained at present, and that strain will continue and may worsen without profound change and a redistribution of municipal resources toward a less punitive structure. A much longer conversation with a focus on concrete restorative policy change outcomes must be conducted to address this divide between the City and the residents of the West Side. With the current political push to significantly reduce funding for police programs and reinvest those funds into social and community programs unconnected from police, this is a very opportune time to imagine how to better address issues of public health and safety and open these conversations with Buffalo residents, especially on the West Side in areas where residents must contend with a full century of disinvestment.
The Grant Street Neighborhood Center, a program of PUSH Buffalo, is a youth center run out of a city-owned building that formerly housed a public library at 271 Grant Street. At present this space is closed for renovations and due to the COVID-19 crisis, but hopes are that the space will reopen in 2021 with the Buffalo State College Community Academic Center also sharing the space. Similarly, the Asarese-Matters Community Center is a city-owned and managed youth recreation center.

As far as government services, Grant Street is home to a post office and the WNY office of Assembly member Sean Ryan. Buffalo State College maintains a substantial amount of property along Grant Street, but the space directly on Grant Street is largely parking lots or dorms that do not engage the street.

Non-profit programs such as the Salvation Army, the WASH Project, and Westminster Economic Development Initiative maintain semi-public spaces for their programs.

Similarly, small businesses all along Grant Street also represent a mix of semi-public spaces, including some “third” space businesses, such as Shakti Yoga, Sweet_ness 7, Gypsy Parlor and Al’s Family Restaurant.

Ultimately, despite the aforementioned spaces, Grant Street lacks an appropriate amount of shared public space for such a dense community.

Survey respondents report discomfort with loiterers on the sidewalk, but many of these loiterers simply have no public spaces other than the sidewalk to meet. The only real exceptions are at the corner of Grant and Ferry and the corner of Lafayette and Grant, which both feature small pocket park areas with benches. Despite the substantial number of restaurants, only three businesses on Grant Street have patio space. Although Grant Street has a disproportionately large amount of “green space” compared to much of the city, this space is almost exclusively privately-owned fenced-in vacant lots, such as the vacant fenced lot at Auburn Avenue and Grant Street.
Conclusions and Next Steps

Just like everyone else globally, staff at PBN have needed to rapidly shift in these past few months in response to COVID-19 and other crises, and as we take our next steps moving forward with the Grant Street planning process, we move with very thoughtful and cautious direction. This initial findings report hopefully sets the groundwork that we will collectively need for these next few challenging years. Upon the conclusion and delivery of this Existing Conditions Report, PBN will be working on community engagement and final recommendations reports.
This planning process is presently ongoing. For more information about this process or to participate in surveys or asset mapping sessions, please visit https://preservationbuffaloniagara.org/what-we-do/grant-st/ and https://gobikebuffalo.org/project/grant-street-streetscape-design-study/

Preservation Buffalo Niagara’s surveys remain open until September 28, 2020.

Please contact us with any questions or comments at info@pbnsaves.org or 716-852-3300