



Back From the Brink

By David
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Few cities have had as rough a time adapting to post-industrial life as Lawrence, Massachusetts. The city's core textile and shoe factories started leaving after the Bread and Roses strike of 1912, which lasted nine weeks and was the first major labor action in this country in the 20th century. In recent years there wasn't much evidence left that the hulking riverside buildings once boomed with economic activity. The question for city leaders was as much whether to tear the buildings down as what to put in them.

Though it is just 25 miles from Boston, where the economy is white-hot, Lawrence is one of the poorest cities in the country. The north side of the city of 72,000, where most of the Latino population lives, has a homeownership rate of just 12 percent. The citywide unemployment rate is consistently twice the national average. Less than 60 percent of adults have a high school degree.

In 1984, tensions between Puerto Rican immigrants and older French-Canadian, Irish and Italian communities led to riots in Lawrence. Since then, it has become a majority Latino city. Immigrants from the Dominican Republic have given new life to the once-moribund downtown, opening hundreds of small businesses there and in surrounding neighborhoods. But in City Hall, the old guard still holds sway, and there has long been a sense of a disconnect between the needs of the young immigrant population and the political leadership.

Into this evolving scene in 1981 came the city's first community development corporation, what is now known as [Lawrence CommunityWorks](#) (LCW). During its first two decades, the CDC built some housing, but by the late 1990s it was best known for its inactivity. The organization was down to a

single employee when its board took control in 1999, inviting then-consultant William Traynor to become director.

While the CDC in its early years might not have gotten much done, it had many talented people involved, says Joseph Kriesberg, director of the Massachusetts Association of Community Development Corporations. “There was enough community involvement that, when we started RHICO [the Ricanne Hadrian Initiative for Community Organizing, which funds organizing by CDCs] in 1997, our selection committee chose Lawrence CommunityWorks for funding because we saw in their board of directors a pretty engaged group.” The key to LCW’s more recent success, he says, was that it didn’t wait for the city’s political class to take the lead.

LCW’s strategy has been much more than one of bricks and mortar. The organization has set out to create a new sense of civic engagement that had largely disappeared in the city. Much of the population that was in Lawrence in the 1960s had moved to the suburbs by the 1990s, followed by the businesses that once catered to them. The riots, rampant arson and other signs of decay convinced many people that the city had lost its soul. LCW had to show that change was possible. The organization now has over 900 members who volunteer in everything from community outreach to youth development.

At the same time, it was also important for residents to feel that the mayor and other political leaders would include them in their plans for redevelopment. Through the Reviviendo Gateway Initiative, LCW helped create a measure of control for the community over the revitalization plan for the city’s “Gateway” area, which includes parts of downtown, the mill district and adjacent residential neighborhoods. Residents are now at the table with businesses, institutions and other stakeholders as the fate of a large area of the city is determined. A major breakthrough came in 2003 when this group convinced the

city council to pass a zoning overlay district for the area to allow a mix of uses, including high-end and affordable housing.

Part of the immense challenge facing Lawrence is its geographic limitations. Packed into less than seven square miles, it was founded by a group of entrepreneurs who named it after a major financier, but most of its business and banking interests today are located outside the city limits. Malden Mills, one of the last clothing makers in the city, attained national attention in the 1990s when its owner opted to rebuild after a devastating fire. But now the company is under the control of outside investors, and jobs could be cut back dramatically. City officials see the old mill buildings in the Gateway area as their best hope for an economic turnaround. In many older cities around the U.S., buildings like these have been renovated in recent years to provide space for people who like living downtown, or for high-tech start-up companies. But the city government's critics, including LCW, say no single "silver bullet" approach – a large employer or a mill redevelopment – will revitalize Lawrence.

Lowell, another aging mill city a few miles upriver from Lawrence, drew its neighbor's envy when it bounced back in the 1990s. Lowell had a significant leftover middle class, vacant land on which to plan new development, and access to federal largesse that funded a new urban national historical park. Lawrence had none of these advantages.

Now, just as LCW is starting to build momentum, energy is also building from outside the city. People priced out of Boston are starting to look at Lawrence as an attractive and affordable place to live and work, just as more Latino residents are putting down roots and transitioning from renting to homeownership. The renewed interest in Lawrence has put sudden, intense pressure on the local housing market; average home prices rose 125 percent over the past five years, making it more difficult for LCW to acquire

property and for low-income residents to buy homes.

There is a sense of optimism in the city that hasn't existed in a long time. The rate of Latinos with the equivalent of a high school degree rose 10 percent during the 1990s, and abandoned properties are being rehabilitated in large numbers. In addition, more Latinos are running for public office, a sign that the city's young immigrant population is becoming more engaged in building the community. A Latina, Isabel Melendez, lost by only 8 percent in her race for mayor against Michael Sullivan in 2001, and Latinos now have almost half the seats on the City Council.

"We are building a constituency that is more conscious of the political arena and critical of what our politicians say and do," says Ana Rodriguez, the president of LCW's board. In many other respects, the city still has a long way to go. "The city has many of the same problems it had 10 years ago, problems that can't be turned around in a few years by one community group," says Kriesberg, though he adds that LCW has made great progress toward that end. He notes that LCW needs the active collaboration of government and regional business interests to succeed.

In addition to entrenched poverty and lack of economic resources, the city suffers from mismanagement. In November, HUD froze the city's access to \$4 million in Community Development Block Grant funds, saying the city had failed to show any results from its investments.

The relationship between a CDC and a local government in a small city like Lawrence is an especially intense one, says Kriesberg. A mayor is likely at times to see the CDC as a thorn in his side, and the CDC will be tempted to lash out at the mayor for not being supportive. But there is a kind of creative tension that has developed in Lawrence, because LCW has opted neither to attack political leaders nor to wait for them to take

action. Kriesberg says the current mayor seems to understand LCW's vital role.

Indeed, LCW remains the key player in the city's resurgence, and its unusual approach to community development has the attention of CDCs throughout Massachusetts and beyond. It remains to be seen if LCW can lead to a reversal of fortunes that began nearly a century ago.

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