

# Concerned Citizens for Springfield, Inc.

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Dear Friend of Springfield,

Enclosed please find a gift copy of a booklet celebrating 25 years of work by Concerned Citizens for Springfield, Inc. We are excited to have reached this milestone and we hope that this overview of our work might inspire others to see the possibilities in the neighborhoods of Springfield. We are a small group, but large in perseverance. As an all-volunteer group, we never had to meet a payroll. Our concern was how a potential project would benefit our neighborhood.

As you will read, CCS was founded as a 501C3 on September 21, 1995 for the purpose of blight remediation and stabilization of properties in the Forest Park neighborhood, the largest neighborhood in Springfield, home to approximately 25,000 people. Through the years, we reached these goals through a wide variety of activities including renovation, new construction, legal remedies, beautification, educational pursuits, cooperative events with public and private entities, and landscaping.

As I look back, it is with gratitude to our members, who never lost their spirit and perseverance even in the face of some huge challenges! As part of our anniversary year, we are refocusing on another challenge, a project we call "Curb Appeal." It is a beautification effort with emphasis on cleanliness and litter reduction throughout our city. As with many other endeavors, the Covid pandemic put a temporary halt to our plans. Our hope is that by working together with city agencies, the Mayor's office, and schools, businesses and neighborhood organizations, the huge and difficult problem of trash and litter can be addressed. We hope that you will join us in this effort.

Finally, as I read this historical overview of our work, it seems almost impossible that such a small group of people could accomplish so much. Honestly, it has been a labor of love, enjoyment, and a privilege to be associated with this diverse group of people who joined together to support a neighborhood. I hope you will read our story, share it as you see fit and, please, contact us for any questions or comments.

Sincerely,



Patricia B. Triggs  
President

# **Concerned Citizens For Springfield, Inc.**

**– Neighborhood Enhancement Through Housing Restoration And Blight Remediation –**



## **Twenty-Five Years of Grassroots Efforts**

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## The Backstory

A group of “concerned citizens” noticed the blighted properties in the vicinity of Belmont Avenue and Locust Street in Springfield, MA and determined to do something. The group developed an action plan, but funds were needed to implement it. Several of the group were members of the Forest Park Civic Association, but the FPCA, by its mandate, could not buy and sell property. Over time, this restriction became a source of frustration for several members who wanted to do something about the blight. Additionally, Kathleen Lingenberg, the Director of Housing in Springfield, was keen to support neighborhood enhancement efforts, but Community Development funds could only be awarded to a not-for-profit organization. The FPCA did not have this status. The prospect of funding galvanized this group of nine neighborhood residents to form a not-for-profit corporation, Concerned Citizens for Springfield, Inc. The date was September 21, 1995.

The action plan called for demolition of several properties on Locust Street, but these were not available, so CCS reviewed its priorities and devised an ambitious and costly plan focusing on the demolition of three large, vacant and uninhabitable properties on the corner of Belmont Avenue and Keith Street.

While CCS reconsidered its priorities for demolition, and funding needs and sources, a group of landlords opposed to rent control disbanded with a few thousand dollars in a bank account. The group sought a not-for-profit to use the funds, and the landlords on the CCS Board steered the money to CCS. During its initial months, CCS worked closely with UMass Amherst’s Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning Department to develop a design plan for Locust Street. The funds were used to landscape three large multi-family properties, install sidewalks and trash cans, and implement a lighting plan. CCS also worked to control an illegal body shop at 279 Locust Street. Follow-up work included repairing and painting the rusted guardrail along the bank of the Mill River on the north side of Locust Street. An effort to reduce traffic on Locust Street by making it a one-way street between Belmont and Dickinson Streets was approved by the Traffic Commission but denied by the City Council. In addition, CCS surveyed empty 1-, 2- and 3-family dwellings in lower Forest Park and developed priorities for their rehabilitation or demolition.

Another year would pass before CCS would acquire title to the properties on Belmont Avenue and Keith Street, and other properties, too, as it focused its attention on the gateway streets into the Forest Park neighborhood. This narrative details these projects and other beautification efforts.

Thirty-three residents have been involved with Concerned Citizens for Springfield, Inc. since its inception in 1995, including apartment landlords, attorneys, a caterer, a computer specialist, educators, an engineer, a librarian, a nurse, a physician, a realtor, a social worker, a TV producer and more. This is their story.

I learned about CCS during the winter of 2019 when Mary Ann Maloney invited me to attend an introductory meeting. Pat Triggs, CCS’s long-time president, spoke at length about CCS’s accomplishments. I was impressed. I took home a copy of the timeline and noticed later that it hadn’t been updated in a decade. I offered to update it at the next meeting. This overview is the result.

Deborah Shea, October 12, 2020

# The Early Years

## *Housing Projects – Renovation* 1997-1999

By 1997, Concerned Citizens for Springfield defined itself as a housing development corporation and a key goal, according to President Pat Triggs, was “promoting owner-occupied properties.” CCS worked with a representative of the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to identify development opportunities in the late 1990s. CCS utilized loans from banks and private sources to fund the selected projects, including:

**340 Dickinson Street**, a two-story single-family house, built in 1904... a successful first project.

Board members noticed the deteriorating condition of this house on Dickinson Street. It was situated in the middle of an otherwise well-maintained block of houses across the street from Holy Name Church, a section with a lot of vehicle and foot traffic. CCS investigated and eventually purchased this four-bedroom house from HUD for \$1,000. The date was April 25, 1997. The house required a complete renovation, including updating the kitchen and bathrooms, and installing new floors. Five months later, on September 26th, a first-time home buyer purchased the renovated house for \$65,500. Pat Triggs recalled that the success of this project reinforced CCS’s belief that “neighborhoods can be saved by rehabilitating one home at a time.”



*340 Dickinson Street: CSS photo 1997.*

**103-105 Commonwealth Avenue**, a 2-family house, built in 1906... a fast-paced turn-around and some funds for the next project. CCS acquired this large 2-family house from HUD on April 17, 1998. The cost was \$7,500. The house required extensive renovation. Available documents detail the exterior and interior work undertaken by contractors (roof, siding, and porch repair; kitchen and bathroom upgrades; painting and electrical upgrade, etc.) and the total costs for the project, including insurance and closing costs (\$61,802). CCS sold this house at market-rate (\$80,000) to a first-time home buyer on October 29, 1998.

**95 Keith Street**, a single-family house, built in 1912... another fast around. Another HUD property, CSS acquired ownership of this small house for \$35,000 of February 18, 1999. CSS repaired and then sold this dwelling for \$69,000 the next year (January 21, 2000).

**44 Lester Street**, a single-family house built in 1906... this property and 95 Keith Street were purchased on the same day. Acquired from HUD for \$35,000 on February 18, 1999, CCS immediately got to work on the renovation of this house. A list, developed two days after purchase, details the extensive work needed to prepare the house for resale, including the exterior (paint exterior, replace front steps, repair chimney, install new storm door, etc.), general interior (clean windows, install roll shades, repair sash cords, unstick doors, paint radiators, etc.), as well as numerous repairs to the front hall, dining room, kitchen, bathrooms and other rooms, and the attic and basement. CCS renovated and sold this property seven months later to a first-time home buyer. The market-rate price was \$77,500 and the sale date was September 15, 1999.

### *Housing Projects – Moderate Income Rentals*

**26-28-30 White Street and 15 Revere Street.** Springfield's Director of Housing, Kathleen Lingenberg, brought this vacant and boarded-up 4-plex to CCS's attention. It was owned by Brightwood Development Corporation, but the property was neglected as their area of focus was the North End of Springfield. CCS acquired ownership of this property for \$75,000 in December 1998, hired contractors and got to work. Kitchens and bathrooms were upgraded, bedrooms were reconfigured and carpeting was installed. Other work involved improving the exterior lot which had parking for 22 cars. The size of the parking lot was reduced by removing a large amount of macadam, and the yard was redesigned, fenced and modestly landscaped. Rather than sell this complex of four small attached apartments, CCS Board members decided to rent the units to moderate income tenants. That decision enabled CCS to receive some Community Development Funds. CCS hired a property management company to oversee the four rental units (12/17/1998-present).



*26-28-30 White Street: Paul Hetzel Photo 2020.*

### *Housing Projects – New Construction*

**233 Belmont Avenue-3 Keith Street and 11-13 Keith Street,** two new 2-family houses... a training opportunity for students from Roger L. Putnam Vocational-Technical High School (PVHS) and a design award from the Springfield Preservation Trust.

Concurrent with its first renovation project at 340 Dickinson Street, CCS developed an ambitious plan to demolish three large, vacant and uninhabitable properties on the corner of Belmont Avenue and Keith Street to make-way for construction of two 2-family homes for occupancy by moderate income families. CCS acquired ownership of the apartment building on June 13, 1997 at no cost. The acquisition of the other properties, two 6-family houses (the "green monsters") on Keith Street, was complicated by the fact that the owner resided in China.<sup>1</sup> Signatures needed to be verified and that meant a few trips to the American Embassy for the China-based owner. The deal closed, finally, seven months later, on January 20, 1998, and the cost was \$20,000. Springfield's Director of Housing, Kathleen Lingenberg, again assisted by helping CCS to obtain funds from HUD and bank loans to pay for the project. The City also paid for the demolition of the properties.

The 2-family houses were designed by John L. Tracy and built by a combination of private contractors and 50 PVHS students enrolled in carpentry, electrical, and heat, ventilation and air conditioning programs, and their four instructors. The houses were sold to first-time buyers who were able to generate income by renting the second unit. The 2-family replacement house on Keith Street sold on February 7, 2000 (sale price: \$109,900) and the second replacement house at the corner of Belmont Avenue and Keith Street sold four days later for \$101,500.<sup>2</sup>



*233 Belmont Avenue – 3 Keith Street:*

*(construction) Bill Malloy photo 1999;*

*CSS photo 2000;*

*11-13 Keith Street: Paul Hetzel photo 2020.*



### ***Neighborhood-Focused Activities and Support Beautification Efforts***

**Johnny Appleseed Park**, at the end of Locust Street and adjacent to the Mill River, next to the intersection of Dickinson, Hancock and Orange Streets... reclaiming a park in CCS's initial area of focus.

CCS was aware of gang activity on Noel Street and in the adjacent Johnny Appleseed Park. The police also were aware and often dispatched to Johnny Appleseed Park to break up gang activity around the rusted play sets and the basketball court with no hoops. CCS worked with the police and residents on Noel Street to get rid of a gang and drug dealing activities. There were vacant and boarded up houses on Orange St. and lower Dickinson Street. CCS noticed those too and was working with the City to take back the land.

Park reclamation was the next step and Martha Moriarty, CCS's Community Coordinator, led the effort. She secured a \$10,000 Enterprise Fund matching grant from Springfield's Community Development Office in spring 1997 and rolled up her sleeves. The match involved in-kind contributions and donated labor. Planners from the University of Massachusetts, workers from the Park Department, DUI volunteers from the Hampden County House of Correction and neighborhood residents participated in the clean-up which involved removing brush, pruning trees, cleaning up litter, installing a swing set, painting play equipment, painting the fence and bridge, installing flower boxes and planting flowers. Five apple trees were planted along the perimeter of the park as a tribute to Johnny Appleseed, a Massachusetts native, and the park's namesake, who may have passed through Springfield as he traveled west in the early 1800s.

The following spring, Martha Moriarty received an additional \$3,500 mini-grant to purchase additional play equipment and trash containers. In the ensuing years, CCS has been involved in several park clean-ups, but the drug dealing and littering (bottles, drug paraphernalia) continues despite these efforts.

**The Orange Street Project**, a seven-year slog yields three new 2-family houses and a preservation award for architectural significance.

Lower Orange Street was close to CCS's initial area of focus. It was also less than a block away from JohnnyAppleseed Park where playground equipment had just been installed, and around the corner from 20 Dickinson Street where a derelict house had been demolished to make way for a community garden. There were several blighted buildings on lower Orange Street and, in 1996, CCS hatched a plan to demolish them with the City's help. The neighbors helped, too, by pressing the City to reverse a building permit granted to a developer based in Worcester for 16 Orange Street, a burned-out apartment building.<sup>3</sup> By May 1997, CCS had a purchase and sale agreement (P&S) for 16 Orange Street, a "conditional" commitment for funding from Community Development, and the burned-out building had been added to the City's demolition list. CCS acquired the building on December 19, 1997 for \$10,000 and it was demolished the next year.

CCS worked with the City of Springfield to demolish several other properties on lower Orange Street in 1998, including 22-24, 34, and 38-40 Orange Street. Early the next year, CCS acquired the "ugly, stucco 4-family" house at 30-32 Orange Street for \$20,000 and had it demolished.<sup>4</sup>

The next steps for the Orange Street Project evolved as CCS and the City considered options for developing the various parcels of land, two of which were owned by CCS. Meanwhile, CCS posted a "For Sale or Build-to-Suit" sign on one of the parcels. By fall 2000, discussions with the Hampden Hampshire Housing Partnership (HAP) led to an ambitious housing project. A P&S was approved for the construction of three 2-family houses on four parcels of land using some state and federal funds. The discovery and removal of three underground storage tanks and the clean-up of a leaking oil tank at 16 Orange Street delayed the sale and CCS still retains ownership of a small section of the parcel where the spill occurred, a section encased in concrete. The sale closed finally on March 21, 2002 when HAP acquired two parcels from CCS (16-18 and 30-32 Orange Street) for \$46,000 and two parcels from the City of Springfield (sale price: \$0).

HAP, now known as Way Finders, then constructed three 2-family houses for occupancy by moderate income families, based on designs by John L. Tracy. HAP sold the houses in December 2002 (38-40 Orange Street, sale price: \$110,000), February 2003 (16-18 Orange Street, sale price: \$112,500)<sup>5</sup> and May 2003 (30-32 Orange Street, sale price: \$100,000).

**Marengo Park**, Belmont Avenue at Euclid Avenue. CCS landscaped and fenced a small triangular park at the intersection of these streets (1998-2000). The effort was funded in part with \$1,100 donated by families living in the neighborhood. Martha Moriarty and CCS volunteer Mary Beth Oakley went door-to-door soliciting donations and received support from about 30 families.

The decorative fence was fabricated by students participating in a metalworking class at the Massachusetts Career Development Institute, and then sand-blasted, primed and painted. The fence was installed in sections, beginning in June and completed in fall 2000. Centennial Construction undertook the installation. Nearby residents continue to maintain this small park.

*Marengo Park: Paul Hetzel photo 2020.*





## Community Gardens, 1998–2020

**78 Beaumont Street**, developed on the site of a derelict 6-family house... demolition, a deed restriction and a title transfer beget vegetables and flowers.

Another early project to reduce blight in the Forest Park neighborhood, the transformation of 78 Beaumont Street into a community garden was spearheaded by Russ Seelig. During his neighborhood rounds, Seelig noticed a vacant and boarded 6-family house on Beaumont Street. The house was landlocked, that is, there was no space for a driveway and off-street parking was not available because the neighborhood was densely settled. An inspection revealed that the house had been stripped by salvagers and vandals. Seelig decided to purchase the house in January 1997. He worked with the City to demolish the house and then take over ownership of the vacant parcel with a deed restriction prohibiting building on the site. 78 Beaumont Street opened as a Community Garden in May 1998.

Martha Moriarty oversaw the transformation of this vacant lot and another at 20 Dickinson Street into successful gardens. Cover Technologies donated topsoil and the City transported it to the gardens. CCS installed a fence and then volunteers planted flowers along it. The garden at Beaumont Street is the largest with seven plots. Five residents planted fruits and vegetables during the inaugural year, including watermelons, pumpkins, collard greens, eggplants and corn. Neighborhood youths affiliated with the C-SPY program, assisted by weeding, planting flowers and watering plants. Neighbors pitched-in too by helping to plant and mow the tree belt lawn. For several years, the City continued to provide truckloads of compost for the gardens. CCS's Jennifer Markey managed the gardens for a season and then, in spring 2001 Sheila McElwaine took over. McElwaine continues to manage the two community gardens.



*Community Garden, Dickinson Street: Jeremy Cole photos, 2010 and 2005.*

**20 Dickinson Street**, developed on the site of a derelict multi-family house... another demolition with a purpose.

CCS considered well-traveled Dickinson Street to be one of the gateway streets into the Forest Park neighborhood. Unfortunately, a multi-family home with a collapsed roof was situated near the “gateway” at the bottom of the street. CCS worked with the City to demolish the house and convert the lot into a community garden. The house was demolished on December 26, 1996, but several outstanding liens on the property delayed the conversion effort. The Office of Community Development agreed to pay the liens for water, sewer and taxes (about \$7,500) if CCS could secure the release of a lien for \$18,750 in favor of Harvey Gruskin, a local attorney. Paul Sears was enlisted to negotiate with Mr. Gruskin and his efforts evidently were successful. 20 Dickinson Street opened as a Community Garden in May 1998.

The rocky soil at 20 Dickinson Street posed some challenges for Martha Moriarty as she worked to transform the wasteland into something bountiful. Four neighborhood residents succeeded in growing flowers, fruits and vegetables in their eight-by-12 foot plots that first year. Several years later the plots were reconfigured. The front plots were planted with flowers, another plot became a propagation bed for daylilies for beautification projects, and four plots were reserved for vegetable gardens. Several neighborhood residents return to plant vegetables year after year... a community garden, indeed!

## Other Activities – A Sample

**Earth Day** Clean-up, 1996 and 1997. The area of focus was the Mill River, and CCS and the National Guard participated. The following year 40 neighborhood residents volunteered for the Earth Day Clean-up.

**Neighborhood Preservation**... a City Council-approved zone change yields chain link and barbed wire on a residential street.

CCS joined with the Forest Park Civic Association (FPCA) to oppose a zone change requested by Belmont Laundry so that it could demolish three houses on Crystal Avenue to make way for an upgrade of its facility. The upgrade was needed to meet City requirements for reducing contaminants in its wastewater. CCS and FPCA proposed a land swap. The idea was for Belmont Laundry to sell the houses on Crystal Avenue to CCS, and then use the funds to purchase an underutilized parking lot adjacent to their property for its proposed installation of water storage tanks and a garage to store them and its fleet of delivery trucks. CCS hoped to rehab and then sell the three houses, but the effort was unsuccessful. Belmont Laundry demolished the houses, paved the lots and then installed a chain link fence topped by barbed wire to create a secure parking lot for its delivery trucks (1998-1999).



*Belmont Laundry, Crystal Avenue: Deborah Shea photo 2020.*

**Training.** During the late 1990s, Sheila McElwaine oversaw the development of a series of training programs for landlords and home owners. The first Landlord Training program took place in spring 1997 at the Forest Park Library and its success led to two other offerings during the summer. More than 180 people attended the training program. Two CCS Board members were session speakers: Pat Triggs, owner of a 2-family house in the neighborhood, and Attilio Cardaropoli, past president of the Rental Housing Association of Greater Springfield. The other session speaker represented Springfield's Department of Code Enforcement.

In addition, the Office of Community Development held special sessions of its Homebuyers Programs in Russian and Vietnamese languages. Seven Russian families and ten Vietnamese families graduated from the spring session, and three participants expressed interest in purchasing a home. A schedule of new programs was planned for August 1997.

In September 1997, Fair Housing Training was offered for owners of 2- and 3-family homes in the Forest Park neighborhood. The three hour session included presentations by a commissioner from the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination (MCAD) and a compliance officer in MCAD's Springfield Office.

The Landlord Training program expanded to six sessions in 1998. Subjects included *Tenant Selection and Screening, Evictions and Leases* taught by Attilio Cardaropoli; *State Sanitary Code and Local Ordinances Covering Interior and Exterior Maintenance* taught by the Deputy Director of Springfield's Department of Code Enforcement; and *Property Management From The Small Landlord's Perspective* taught by a member of HAP and by Pat Triggs. The free program was attended by 70 landlord/owners.<sup>6</sup>

## *Awards*

*Mayor's Neighborhood Improvement Award* (first-ever) for replacing dilapidated buildings on Belmont Avenue and Keith Street with two new homes, issued by Mayor Michael J. Albano, May 3, 1999.

*Springfield Preservation Trust Award For Compatible New Construction*, 233 Belmont Avenue, designed by John L. Tracy, received in 2000.

*Springfield Preservation Trust Award For Architectural Significance*, 16-18 Orange Street, designed by John L. Tracy, received in 2003.

# The Next Decade

## 2000-2009

Following several years of project work and activities, CCS reviewed and defined its intent. In January 2000, the following goals were proposed as an addendum to Article V of the By-Laws:

Work with Office of Housing of the City of Springfield to promote affordable housing in the Forest Park neighborhood (01108). In its affordable housing program, the Corporation will include rehabilitation of existing houses and construction of new housing to be accessible to low and moderate income families.

Work with Springfield Police Department, particularly the community police assigned to Forest Park, to reduce crime and vandalism in the Forest Park neighborhood.

Work with various City Departments to reduce blight and the appearance of blight in the Forest Park neighborhood.

Provide educational opportunities to Forest Park property owners and other residents regarding property management and responsibilities.<sup>7</sup>



60 Fairfield Street: Paul Hetzel photo 2020.

## *Housing Projects – Renovation*

### 2000s

**60 Fairfield Street**, a single-family house, built 1902... a mortgage default, a cold winter day and some quick action.

Paul Sears, a real estate developer, noticed that the bank auction for this house in the Forest Park Heights Historic District would be held on February 23, 2001 and the weather forecast was for very cold temperatures. He surmised that the auction would be sparsely attended and alerted CCS of the opportunity. Sears and Russ Seelig attended the auction along with one other person, a bank representative. CCS acquired ownership of the house with a bid of \$68,500. Next steps involved a walk-through, preparation of a work plan for the renovation, and a schedule. The renovation was carried-out by contractors working side-by-side with inmates participating in the Hampden County House of Correction's Worker Reentry Program. Seven months later, on September 18, 2001, a first-time home buyer purchased the updated house for \$142,000, the market-rate.

**46 Forest Park Avenue**, now a 2-family house... the remarkable transformation of a "modern colonial" house.

The plans for this "modern colonial" home, built in 1897, were featured in *Scientific American* magazine's *Building Edition* for March 1899, along with houses in Hartford, New Haven, and Bremen, Germany.<sup>8</sup> Within a decade an 18-room wing was added and this notable single-family home was transformed into a tuberculosis sanitarium. Still later, it became a small hotel locally known as the "Forest Park Inn." In time, the "Inn" devolved into a rooming house and a nexus for social, drug and crime problems.

By 1997 the Inn was vacant and boarded-up, and CCS noticed. The City of Springfield eventually acquired title to the property for non-payment of taxes and in March 2000 solicited proposals for reuse from interested developers. A few months later, on July 12, 2000, the City sold the property to CCS for \$10,000. Community Development Funds were used to support the renovation, including the demolition of the addition, and the installation of a driveway that is "shared" with a neighbor and a two-car garage. Lots of hands were involved in the effort. John L. Tracy oversaw the redesign and Centennial

Construction served as the general contractor. Five instructors from Roger L. Putnam Vocational-Technical High School and their team of students assisted with the interior work. Four youths from the New England Farm Workers Council led by two PVHS instructors helped for part of the summer of 2001.

Finally, after three years of work, this complicated and costly (over-budget) restoration project was complete. The house sold on July 18, 2003 with a restriction in the deed requiring that the house be owner-occupied for 25 years. CCS initiated this restriction to prevent purchase by an absentee landlord. The sale price was \$198,200.



*46 Forest Park Avenue and 134 Forest Park Avenue: Paul Hetzel photos 2020.*

**134 Forest Park Avenue**, a single-family house, built in 1910... a rehab project that became a neighborhood event!

By 2009, when CCS acquired this house, it was in poor condition. The house was no longer owner-occupied; it had changed hands several times and had become a rental property. Neighbors Phil and Liz Contant and Brian and Mary Ann McDonald approached CCS with an offer: if CCS would buy the house which was on the market as a “short sale,” they would contribute to the cost of the rehab. CCS agreed and acquired the house on June 12, 2009 for \$107,500. The Contants and the McDonalds together with other neighbors loaned \$30,000 to facilitate the acquisition, and several of them also assisted in the rehab of the house. Their sweat-equity included mechanical and electrical work, scraping and painting, plumbing, and their children helped. The upgrade took about seven months to complete. The house sold on February 16, 2010 for \$203,000, a modest loss, but the revenue enabled CCS to repay the neighbors.<sup>9</sup>



*134 Forest Park Avenue (neighborhood volunteers): CSS photos 2009.*

## ***Housing Projects – Moderate Income Rentals***

**298-302 Belmont Avenue**, two commercial units and four residential units, built in 1910.

Baystate Medical Center donated this property to CCS on December 18, 2001.<sup>10</sup> CCS re-roofed and re-sided the structure, renovated the interior and removed blacktop from the front for landscaping. A \$5,000 grant from the Davis Foundation enabled CCS to provide summer jobs to clients of the New England Farm Worker's Council. Instructors from Putnam Vocational-Technical High School oversaw their work. CCS rented the units for several years before selling the property on November 1, 2005. CCS netted \$198,825 for its efforts.

A fire severely damaged this property on April 2, 2019 and it is vacant and boarded as of this writing. The fire started in an adjacent 6-unit mixed-use building (306 Belmont Avenue) and spread to this property. Improper disposal of smoking materials has left ten families without homes.

## ***Neighborhood Beautification Efforts***

**Demolition and Stabilization – Longhill Gardens Condominiums**, now Forest Park Apartments, Edgeland and Longhill Streets... a lesson in perseverance.

Longhill Gardens was a complex of five 3-story buildings and 211 apartments when it was built in 1950. A Boston-based developer purchased the complex in 1987 and the plan was to convert the rental apartments to condominiums. The mostly elderly tenants and long-term residents were given the option to buy their apartment or move. Few units sold. To encourage sales, packages of ten condominiums were sold to investors in Boston. The cost was \$40,000 or more per unit. The complicated, broken-up management of the complex led to poor maintenance and a rise in crime. By the mid-1990s, many of the investors defaulted. The result was chaotic as many banks were involved in the foreclosures and some of those banks also were failing. Two investors began purchasing the foreclosed units in 1996, but maintenance of the complex continued to decline. By fall 2001, less than five percent of the units were owner-occupied.

CCS considered purchase of 177 of the units in 2002, but rescinded the offer when boring tests revealed structural problems. It was during this time that CCS and others, too, began to notice illegal activity in the garages with broken locks and missing doors on Edgeland Street. The estimated 50 garages on Edgeland Street had been built for the residents of Longhill Gardens, but the years and years of lax management and maintenance led to their abandonment. CCS tried to purchase the garages in 2002 with a goal of demolishing them, but the offer was rejected because the owners anticipated a better offer.

Two years later, in 2004, Longhill Omega, LLC purchased 177 units and then another 15 units. CCS got involved the next year (2005), when it acquired five condominium units from the City of Springfield after the owners defaulted on their taxes. The cost was \$27,196. In mid-summer 2005, CCS sought approval from Longhill Omega to demolish the garages. The demolition cost was \$77,000, but the elimination of a locus for drug dealing, prostitution and other illegal activities was critical to CCS's neighborhood revitalization efforts. CCS planned to amortize the cost of the demolition by renovating and then renting the five condominium units, but code violations stymied the effort. Lead paint was found in the common spaces, and entry locks and windows were broken. CCS's demand for remediation was ignored by the managers of the Condominium Association.

In June 2006, CCS sued Longhill Omega, LLC, the majority owner of the condominiums, and that action led to a convoluted and protracted three-year effort to stabilize the complex. Code violations were the issue – lead paint, broken locks, malfunctioning intercoms, missing lights, and more. Forged certificates indicating the apartments were lead-free, added complications. The violations were not corrected and management failed by year's end. Shalom Segelman purchased the complex aided by a \$6 million mortgage from Citibank.

After numerous hearings in Hampden County Housing Court, and Court Orders for compliance with code violations, Shalom Segelman was jailed twice in 2007 for non-compliance, and the management of Longhill Gardens failed again. A receiver was appointed, occupants were relocated, and all of the buildings were closed and boarded. In December 2008 Boston-based WinnCompanies purchased the complex at a foreclosure auction and then developed a plan to reduce the density of the complex and create affordable housing. Demolition on both sides of Longhill Street reduced the number of buildings to three and the number of units to 109. Twenty percent of the units were to be market-rate rentals.

Finally, in 2009, all litigation ended with the dismissal of two federal lawsuits filed by Shalom Segelman against CCS and Board-members Russ Seelig and Bill Malloy in particular. The cost to CSS was over \$200,000 and to remain solvent CSS sold some of its rental-income properties. With stabilization of the Gardens finally in sight, CCS sold its five units to the WinnCompanies. The first units were available for occupancy in December 2009. A ribbon-cutting ceremony for the renovated and renamed “Forest Park Apartments” was held on July 28, 2010.



*Forest Park Apartments: Paul Hetzel photos 2020.*



**Graffiti Remediation, 2000-2009....** The lesson learned: “prompt clean-up is a good inhibition.”<sup>11</sup>

In spring 2000, CCS turned its attention to the graffiti problem in the Forest Park neighborhood and Belle Rita Novak was the point person. Identify the location and paint color, and the graffiti was gone! Graffiti was reported and painted over or cleaned in a wide variety of places: along the long retaining wall at Rt. 91 North /Exit 2, on the Bing Theater on Sumner Avenue, and on street signs and stop signs. DWI offenders helped with the clean-up courtesy of the District Attorney’s office and CCS rallied neighbors to assist with clean-up efforts. But the most effective strategy in CCS’s arsenal was legislation. CCS, and another neighborhood group, the East Springfield Neighborhood Council, encouraged (urged) the City Council to enact legislation that would make property owners responsible for removing graffiti. The legislation was approved and went into effect on December 4, 2000. Another 16 months would pass before the impact of the legislation was noticed in the Forest Park neighborhood and, between here-and-there, CCS had hired a contractor (Rocco Cortina) to focus on the problem. The high cost of paint was observed, too. CCS considered asking homeowners for donations or acquiring recycled paint from the hazardous waste drop-off site at Bondi’s Island.

By mid-May 2002, CCS noticed a decline in “tags” – that-is location-specific reports of graffiti – and by the end of 2003, Forest Park was in “good shape.” The City of Springfield started an active remediation program in 2004, another win for CCS. Graffiti remediation efforts continued to be reported throughout the decade.

**Code Enforcement, 2000-2009...** It's "a long process to get compliance, but the benefits are there."<sup>12</sup>

In addition to her graffiti remediation efforts, in spring 2000 CCS began paying Belle Rita Novak to identify and report problems such as litter, overgrowth, and unregistered cars to the Building Department's Code Enforcement Division. A few months later, CCS decided to send its "large" list of violators to the Springfield Union-News. CCS was concerned about the Forest Park neighborhood and wanted action. CCS also wanted to encourage responsible ownership. The response to the article is unknown, but Code Enforcement's follow-up to Novak's long list inspired a continuing effort on the part of CCS. Within a year, and with Code Enforcement's encouragement, several CCS members began reporting violations and a backlog developed. CCS members discussed issues with Code Enforcement's Commissioner Peter Garvey and they met with neighborhood groups, too.

CCS members noticed and reported boarded-up properties, burned-out properties, and all manner of exterior code violations and they met with Code Enforcement to review code items, again. Several dozen locations were reported to Code Enforcement by the end of 2003, and then the enforcement process got bogged down. The City's poor financial condition led to staff reductions. A Financial Control Board took over and got the City back on track. An increase in the fees for building permits in 2004 enabled the Building Department to hire 12 additional staff members. CCS's Sheila McElwaine offered to work with Code Enforcement to pursue "improved performances."<sup>13</sup>

CCS identified key needs for its blight-busting program in its Issues and Action Plan for FY 2006, including streamlining the reporting and permitting process, and providing better linkage to the Law Department, quicker turn-around of blighted properties, and funds for demolition. Another activity involving "Increasing Citizen Participation" focused on providing Housing Code counseling to low and moderate income residents. The end goal was to help low income families correct housing code and ordinance violations. Some of these needs led to more meetings, including one with the Law Department to review the tax title process. With home renovation in mind, CCS hoped for a faster tax title taking process. Following that meeting, in late 2007, CCS was able to obtain a list of all tax title properties in the Forest Park neighborhood, and in the rest of the City, too. Within a few months, CCS observed that the City had three lawyers essentially working full-time on code enforcement issues. A concerted effort, indeed!

CCS tracked many problem properties and reported on their status at its Board meetings. The examples below reveal CCS's efforts, ideas for action, and the months and years it sometimes takes to achieve results.

**19-21 Belmont Place, 2002-2005:** court dates, warrant for owner's arrest, no action, anti-blight ordinance filed in Housing Court, renovations finally underway.

**44-46 Washington Street, 2002-2004:** burned-out property, many problems; CCS considers picketing Woronoco Savings Bank, the mortgage holder; Housing Court twice orders owner to clear snow and ice off sidewalks, wants administrative actions through Code Enforcement; Court issues third order for snow removal, some work done; agreement for site appearance; owner fined for not adhering to court agreement; fine not paid; working on new completion schedule; owner has violated another court-approved settlement; people living in house in conflict with court-approved agreement... on and on.

**89 Cliftwood Street, a 6-family building, 2004-2005:** owner has signed agreement to complete all code work in thirty days or face fines of \$100/day; owner has paid first \$800 installment of fine, two other installments; fine paid but appearance slipping; property sold in 2005.

**Family Dollar Store, 2004:** something has caused site to be cleaned up, either a code citation or a letter threatening picketing at owner's home.

**36 Fairfield Street, 2004-2005:** fire-damaged house; owner fails to show up in court; preliminary hearing rescheduled, expect owner to arrive voluntarily or in handcuffs; house demolished. CCS had hoped to motivate the owner to clean-up the house and then sell it at a reasonable price.

**11 Hiawatha Street, 2006:** house falling apart for past several years; in tax title; owners avoid City-taking; being rehabbed.

**312 Locust Street, 2007:** illegal auto work continues.

## *Community-Related Activities and Support*

### **Community Fairs**

May 6, 2000, Community Fair with the Vietnamese American Civic Assoc. (VACA) and the Maple High/Six Corners Neighborhood Council (MHSC), held in Johnny Appleseed Park. The purpose was to inform residents about available resources and participants included the Springfield Library, the Department of Housing, the Girl Scouts, South Church, Southwest Community Health Center, and the “X” Main Street Corporation. Belle Rita Novak coordinated the event and estimated that 1,000 children and adults attended. Sponsors included Community Foundation of Western MA, BankBoston MHSC, CCS, and CCS member Attilio Cardaropoli.

May 11, 2002, Community Fair, Holy Name Church parking lot.

**Landscaping and More**, Dickinson Street, intersection with Orange Street, 2004-2005. CCS collaborated with Springfield’s Department of Public Works to install and extend the sidewalk in front of the community garden, and install crosswalks and landscape the intersection.

**Mill River Walk**, a CCS-sponsored informational walk along the Mill River on May 4, 2005. The goal was to find developers for near-by properties. A detailed hand-out prepared by Sheila McElwaine and Scott Hanson, executive director of the “X” Main Street Corporation, provided a history of the area and background on a few of the extant buildings, including the Watershops Armory Complex and the oldest house in Springfield (258 Mill Street).

## *Partnerships and Sponsorships*

### **Farmers Market at Forest Park, 2006-2020... from farm to kitchen.**

Belle Rita Novak and Michael Thomes established The Farmers’ Market at the “X” in 1998. The “X” Main Street Corporation sponsored the Farmers’ Market in its earliest days when it was located in the parking lot behind the Goodwill store on Sumner Avenue. In 2006, the Farmers’ Market moved to the Trinity Church parking lot. CCS began sponsoring the Farmers’ Market the next year, following the dissolution of the “X” Main Street Corporation. The Farmers’ Market moved to the Cyr Arena parking lot in Forest Park in 2010 and a winter market with a reduced schedule opened in 2011. A wide-variety of vendors have participated in the weekly Market over the years, including local vegetable farms, dairy farms, butchers, bread bakers, cheese makers, cider and wine sellers, a fish monger and local crafts people. The Market serves an estimated 500 customers each week. Novak continues to manage the Market.

The Farmers’ Market has been a gathering place since its inception, neighbors sharing news and buying fresh produce and other products. Novak shared local news, too, in her weekly *What’s News at the Farmers’ Market*. Novak’s newsletter contains announcements, information about local programs and events, vendor profiles, recipes for in-season produce and how to cook it, and more. Additionally, Novak, a long-time civic advocate, used her newsletter to encourage patrons to pick up litter and recycle paper and plastic bags.



*Farmers' Market: Russ Seelig photo 2014.*



**Forest Park Partnership**, consisting of the “X” Main Street Corporation, the Forest Park Civic Association and CCS, formed in December 2000. The goal of the Partnership was to revitalize the Forest Park neighborhood through historic preservation, neighborhood commercial district economic development, and improvements to pedestrian and vehicular access and safety. In June 2001, the Massachusetts State Legislature approved \$294,092 for gateway signs and period street lights. Details of these and other projects follow:

**Gateway Signs.** A key component of the Partnership’s revitalization efforts was the installation of signs welcoming visitors to the Forest Park neighborhood, the “X” Commercial District, Forest Park, and The Zoo. CCS earmarked \$8,000 for the project even before funds were approved by the State Legislature in June 2001. Work proceeded apace. Within a few weeks of “approval,” the design for the sign was in progress and four installation sites were identified and approved by the Department of Public Works. These were two locations on Longhill Street (north end and south end near Rt. 91 North / Exit 2), at the intersection of Belmont Avenue and White Street (small triangle), and at the south end of Dickinson Street, across from the Jewish Community Center. The signs were ready to be installed by mid-summer 2002, but considerable advance work was needed. The advance work involved landscaping, particularly at the north end of Longhill Street, described by CCS Treasurer Mary Ann Maloney as “a gnarled overgrowth [with] broken rusted-out fences and rotted trees.”<sup>14</sup> There were other challenges, too.

Within a year, the sign on the south end of Longhill Street had been hit twice by cars and had to be moved, and the sign at the intersection of Belmont Avenue and White Street needed big rocks around the triangle to protect it. CCS contributed \$2,000 to that effort. There was a delay in the installation of the 4th sign at the south end of Dickinson Street, but Scott Hanson, executive director of the “X” Main Street Corporation, met with the objectors and smoothed feathers. That sign was installed in 2004.

In addition to Gateway Signs, the Partnership installed historic district marker signs in key locations in the neighborhood. Three small marker signs were stolen in 2004, but quickly replaced with improved fasteners, thanks to several real estate businesses who donated to the effort. Finally, the beautiful landscaping of the site on the north end of Longhill Street was complete and a reception was held on December 2, 2004 to celebrate the milestone.

CCS continues to maintain the site at the north end of Longhill Street and Mary Ann Maloney, ever at the ready to collect litter, keeps “rubber gloves, a plastic bag and a long handled pole with a nail on the bottom” in the trunk of her car.<sup>15</sup> Maintenance costs for the north end of Longhill Street continue to be reported in the minutes to present.



*Paul Hetzel photo 2020.*

**Street Lights.** The goal of this effort was to install turn-of-the-century style street lights throughout the Forest Park neighborhood, but the State Legislature reduced the initial request by more than half. The DPW approved site locations and work started in June 2001 with the installation of a few sample street lights on Washington Road and along Sumner Avenue between Cliftwood and Lenox Streets. Following review and approval, Western Massachusetts Electric Co. (now Eversource) installed an estimated 100 new street lights along Sumner Avenue at the “X” and along Belmont Avenue the following year. Work wrapped up in spring 2003 with the installation of another seven street lights along Dickinson Street, south of the “X.” A total of 128 lights were installed during the three-year project.

In 2006, Bill Malloy and Pat Triggs wrote letters to State Representative Cheryl Coakley-Rivera seeking additional funds to complete the project. The Partnership’s original request had been for \$600,000, and the allotted amount was insufficient to complete the lighting project as described in the original plan developed in 1999. Their efforts secured a \$75,000 grant the following year, but because of cost increases, only seven street lights could be purchased. The additional street lights were installed around the Forest Park Library and near the Forest Park Middle School in 2008.

**Bing Theatre renovation, 2006.** CCS joined forces with the Forest Park Civic Association and the “X” Main Street Corporation to support the renovation of the vacant Bing movie theater on Sumner Avenue and its conversion into an arts center. Governor Mitt Romney vetoed the request for funding, dismissing it as a “pork” project.<sup>16</sup>

**Tree Planting and Stump Grinding, 2006-2007.** Bill Malloy led the effort to plant trees along Sumner Avenue, between Longhill and White Streets, a distance of 1.5 miles. The first step involved the removal of dead trees and the grinding of 20 stumps in September 2006. CCS and the Forest Park Civic Association donated \$8,000 to the City of Springfield to accomplish this task. A total of 52 elm, locust and ash trees were planted in fall 2006 and spring 2007. This local effort was part of the Massachusetts ReLeaf Program and the goal was to plant 1,000 trees state-wide. Funds for the plantings came from the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation (\$6,000). CCS’s efforts inspired the City of Springfield to continue to remove dead trees, grind stumps and plant trees.

### *Awards*

*Springfield Preservation Trust, Donald Campion Award For Outstanding Contribution To Historic Preservation, presented to CCS charter member Russell Seelig, May 3, 2004.*

*Springfield Preservation Trust, 2010 Preservation Award, 134 Forest Park Avenue.*



# Since 2010



*115 Sumner Avenue: Paul Hetzel photo 2020.*

## ***Housing Projects – Renovation***

**115 Sumner Avenue**, a colonial revival house designed by Louis F. Newman, one of the developers of the Forest Park Heights neighborhood, and built in 1898<sup>17</sup> ... an out-of-state death leads to a lengthy court proceeding and a first-time use of receivership for a vacant house.<sup>18</sup>

CCS and neighbors noticed that the condition of the large house on Sumner Avenue was deteriorating and the house appeared to be abandoned. A large tree had fallen and damaged part of the roof, the grass was long, the shrubs were overgrown, and the yard was strewn with trash and litter. Worse yet, squatters were found living in the house. The year was 2009. The owner defaulted on his mortgage and a foreclosure auction was planned but suspended when the bank learned that the owner had died in August of the previous year!

Another two years would pass before CCS was able to acquire title to the property, and that effort involved lengthy negotiations with the bank to urge the discharge of two mortgages totaling \$300,000 and with the deceased owner's brother who lived in California. Finally, in 2010, the City appointed a receiver who began renovating the vacant property.

CCS acquired the title to the property on July 22, 2011 for no fee, bought out the receiver and hired a project manager to oversee a complete restoration of the structure and landscaping. By the end of October 2011, the house was on the market and an open house was scheduled. The house sold on May 15, 2012 for \$235,000. The Springfield Preservation Trust acknowledged CCS's restoration of 115 Sumner Avenue during its annual awards ceremony.

**54 Fairfield Street**, a single-family house, built 1904... a vacant and neglected property poses structural and financial challenges.

CCS acquired this property in April 2014 for \$40,000. The owner was no longer living in the City and the house had been vacant for about four years. A walk-around revealed some eye-popping structural problems largely caused by ice dams on the roof: walls and ceilings were cracked and supported by a zigzag of 2"x 4" and 4"x 6" columns. CCS underestimated the extent of work outlined in the structural report it had commissioned and Board members wondered if the house should be demolished. CCS chose to renovate and the costly work proceeded apace. An engineer, general contractor, electrician, HVAC contractor, and a landscaper were hired and by mid-summer plans for the exterior work and replacement windows were approved by the Historic Commission. Work was completed the next year and on September 23, 2015, the house was sold at the market-rate (\$154,900) to a first-time home buyer. It was a financial loss for CCS. CCS received a 2015 Preservation Award certificate from the Springfield Preservation Trust for its efforts to renovate this house.



*54 Fairfield Street: Paul Hetzel photo 2020.*

### ***Housing Projects – Moderate Income Rentals***

**116-120 Longhill Street**, four condominiums in a 24-unit complex, built in 1920... change comes in small steps.

CCS learned of the pending bankruptcy auction of four condominium units owned by Shalom Segelman, who was also the majority owner of the near-by and mismanaged Longhill Gardens condominium complex. The year was 2010 and the CCS team attended the auction and was able to purchase the units. The acquired units were occupied, two by “problem” tenants who were soon evicted. CCS renovated those units and rented them, and later renovated the other units after the tenants departed.

Ownership of the four units enabled CCS to attend the “chaotic” Condo Association meetings and then install three CCS members on the five-person board of directors. With a majority on the board, CCS was able to facilitate a change in the management of the complex by hiring a manager who wasn’t “pocketing” the Association fees. Linda Caron of Caron Management took on this task. Following her appointment, a capital management plan was developed and approved, and CCS lent funds for urgently needed repairs. In addition, in 2013 CCS planned, funded, and oversaw the construction of a 29-space parking lot for residents and neighbors. The goal was to reduce congestion on the street. The parking lot was built on adjacent land leased from the WinnCompanies. VHB, Inc. handled the construction and the cost was \$65,000. By February 2015, 14 parking spaces were leased and finances were break-even. A positive cash flow was reported the next year. CCS still owns one of the units and the income is used to support new and on-going projects. Two CCS members continue to serve on the board of directors.<sup>19</sup>



*116-120 Longhill Street: Deborah Shea photo 2020.*

### ***Neighborhood Beautification Efforts***

**Code Enforcement, 2010-2020** ... a continuing effort.

CCS was aware that Springfield’s sanitary code requirements were less stringent than the state code and had been urging the City to revise its local code. This happened in increments, finally, in 2010, when the City added several sanitary-related ordinances to its inspection criteria. The City also changed the process for reporting code violations. Members were to call 311 to report exterior violations which then would be referred to a “Flex Squad.” And call they did! Between April and May of 2012, CCS members reported 60 properties on Forest Park Avenue, Leyfred Terrace, and Allen, Revere and Oakland Streets. A meeting with Code Enforcement was added to CCS’s task list in June 2013 and the purpose was to “encourage effort.”

About this time, June 2013, CCS noticed that the City was not fully enforcing its Vacant House Ordinance. Two years later, the ordinance was still held up by appeals from lenders. Evidently lenders didn’t want this ordinance. No matter, CCS persevered. Members continued to gather and report information about blighted houses in the neighborhood.

Amy Gustman joined the CCS Board in December 2016 and her focus was litter. Previously Gustman led a band of students who regularly picked up litter in the Forest Park neighborhood. Her retirement ended that student effort, but soon “anonymous” reporting of litter-related violations was way up!

Some blighted houses continue to languish in the purgatory of being bank-owned and minimally maintained or are City-owned as a result of a failure to pay taxes. The consequences can be costly, both to homeowners who care about the value of their property and to the City. Case in point: In fall 2019, when the City finally issued a request for proposals to purchase and renovate 74 Irvington Street, a seriously deteriorated house that it had owned for five years, it offered a development incentive of \$75,000 to support the renovation!

It has been several years since CCS renovated a blighted house. CCS submitted a proposal for 74 Irvington Street, but another responder was selected. Members had been monitoring a few vacant and blighted houses in the “Cozy Corner” and by December 2019, one house was bank-owned, another was in foreclosure, and a third was in limbo. The mortgage holders had appointed contractors to “protect” the houses, but their work was shoddy. CCS’s letters to owners about acquiring the properties were unanswered. Determined to encourage action, CCS members met with Steve Desilets, Commissioner of the Building Department, and Amber Gould, Associate City Solicitor, to discuss these properties, the status of Code Enforcement’s involvement, and the steps involved in appointing a receiver. The results were discouraging: hearings to enforce various actions are scheduled in Hampden County Housing Court, but the judges sometimes do not show up. A shortage of court resources stymies the efforts of Code Enforcement and the Law Department.

Following the meeting, Attorney Gould alerted CCS to the upcoming foreclosure auction of one of the blighted houses, 163 Pineywoods Avenue. The auction date was December 31, 2019 and access to the property was disallowed. Members Paul Martin and Russ Seelig sprang into action and developed a budget for the renovation and an auction strategy. It was all for naught. The mortgage holder, Deutsche Bank National Trust Company as Trustee for Securitized Asset Backed Receivables LLC Trust, bought the house.<sup>20</sup>

CCS continued to track problem properties and report on their status at its Board meetings. Examples and observations are listed below.

- **55 Bellevue Avenue, 2017-2019:** vacant and owner in arrears of taxes; neighbors seeking to buy but owner is elusive; placed into receivership by City; owner seeking control in Housing Court, approval pending work plan and adequate funding.
- **702 Belmont Avenue, 2019:** bank-owned, boarded up.
- **Bruno Street, 2015:** City fairly responsive to clean-up requests; cleaned-up; illegal dumping continues; Russ Seelig to identify abutters.
- **274 Forest Park Avenue, 2016:** vacant, owner up to date on finances.
- **107 Garfield Street, 2012-2013:** given the lack of exterior maintenance, house will be a target for receivership.
- **33 Greenleaf Street, 2015:** a 2-family house. The owner obtained a variance for 3-family occupancy 32 years ago when the house was owner-occupied. The house is no longer owner-occupied; continuing the 3-family status is questionable.
- **33-35-37 Longhill Street, 2011:** petition to enforce state sanitary code has resulted in new management, and then a change of ownership.
- **269 Longhill Street, a large 2-family house, 2010:** in poor condition, “bottom fisher” doing rehab and renting to irresponsible families.
- **65 Riverview Terrace, 2015-2016:** in receivership; work continues; now owner-occupied.
- **151 Trafton Road, 2017-2018:** condemned in Housing Court; bank foreclosure and new owner.
- **181-183 Trafton Road, 2017-2019:** in distress; taken for taxes; redeemed by owner.
- **54 Washington Road, 2019-2020:** vacant and distressed.
- **130-132 Washington Road, 2019-2020:** vacant, bank-owned, distressed; sold at auction, renovations underway.
- **45 Washington Street, 2016:** court appointed receiver started clean-up, but owner contested; owner failed to pay receiver’s lien, now back in the hands of a receiver.

## **“Curb Appeal”**

2019-2020... Don't curb that trash!

The issues of litter and blighted properties in the Forest Park neighborhood are topics regularly discussed at meetings of the CCS Board. In the current system, residents report litter, overgrowth and blight and the City responds. Street sweeping occurs twice a year on residential streets and eight to ten times per year on main arteries according to Christopher Cignoli, Director of Public Works. It's not enough.

During the summer of 2019, a few members turned to their keyboards and wrote letters about the ubiquitous litter problem and the need for the City of Springfield to do more. The letters were sent to the Mayor and copied to City Council members, representatives of Code Enforcement and the Department of Public Works, the Executive Director of the Park Department, and others.

Russ Seelig was among those letter writers and he capitalized on the momentum. He urged action at a City Council “public speak-out.” The City Council’s Maintenance and Development Sub-Committee, chaired by City Councilor Marcus Williams, took up the issue at a meeting held on October 10, 2019. Several CCS members and people from other neighborhoods attended, shared ideas and brought photos of blighted properties, overgrowth and litter. A second meeting was held in November, but few representatives of City departments attended and the result was inaction. Councilor Williams did not schedule a follow-up meeting.

In February 2020, members devised a new strategy for the “Curb Appeal” initiative. The new approach was to schedule separate meetings with specific departments, e.g., the Mayor’s Office and department heads (Code Enforcement, Parks, Public Works, etc.) to discuss litter, overgrowth and blighted housing. The goal was to understand the chains of command to address specific issues and to determine what resources are needed to correct problems that might impede action on the “Curb Appeal” issues, such as equipment, funds, personnel, etc. A meeting with the Mayor followed in early March 2020 and promises of support were offered.

*Make It Clean. Make It Green. Make It Springfield!*

The 50th Anniversary of Earth Day in April 2020 provided an opportunity to educate children about the problem of litter and involve them in a citywide litter prevention campaign. Katie Orellana and Deborah Shea led this CCS effort. Orellana, a science teacher at the ECOS Center in Forest Park, and Shea planned to work with art teachers and challenge elementary school students to create art for display on the Springfield Museums’ Quadrangle Green during the Earth Day Festival on Sunday April 19, 2020. Their idea was to use the children’s art to create anti-litter posters for display in stores and other venues.

Mary Ann Maloney led a second prong of CCS’s litter education efforts. She focused on Roger L. Putnam Vocational-Technical High School and challenged students to develop a litter prevention campaign. The students developed a comic book-style storyboard focusing on “heroes” who pick up litter and inspire others to do the same, “Springfield is looking for HEROES... heroes don’t worry about who makes the mess, they just clean it up.” The plan was to turn the HEROES storyboard into a video to be aired on local TV and to use the various cartoon panels to create posters for display in libraries and businesses, and on buses, too.

The litter prevention projects were in progress and a few student drawings had been submitted when the unimaginable happened, a deadly novel virus was discovered in China and within weeks it had spread throughout the world. The World Health Organization declared the Coronavirus (COVID-19) a pandemic on March 11, 2020. Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker issued a State of Emergency, and then, a few days later, ordered all schools, restaurants, and non-essential businesses to close for three weeks. The closures were extended, and extended again. The Earth Day Festival, like many events across the region, was cancelled and the student-focused litter prevention campaigns were put on hold.

**Make  
It Clean.**

**Make  
It Green.**

**Make  
It Springfield!**

*Earth Day Anti-Litter*

*Artwork By*

*Hiram L. Dorman*

*Elementary School*

*Students:*

*Jachi Jarett, Grade 4*

*Mishael Perez, Grade 3*

*Magenta Li, Grade 3*





## Gateway Signs, 2010-2020

In mid-summer 2010, F.L. Roberts Holdings informed CCS members that it planned to sell at auction the small parcel on the north end of Longhill Street, the site of the Gateway sign and beautiful welcome garden that CCS worked so diligently to create and maintain. CCS sprang into action and offered to buy the parcel and two others on East Columbus Avenue, but there was no response, and no bidders, evidently. Finally, two years later, F.L. Roberts came calling and CCS's offer was approved. The deal closed at the end of 2012 and the cost was \$1,000.

CCS continues to maintain the Gateway signs and landscaping. Donors support some of the maintenance and a windfall of cash came from Columbia Gas who, in 2013, installed a 12 inch underground pipe without an easement across CCS's recently purchased land. The negotiations took a while, but the payment of \$50,000 was worth the wait. More recently, in 2018, CCS offered to transfer the title of the beautiful welcome garden at the north end of Longhill Street to the City of Springfield. Negotiations with the City continue as of this writing.

## Community-Related Activities and Support

The "X." CCS applied for and in 2010 received a "Neighborhood Centers Grant" for \$40,000 to fund improvements at the "X." The work included planting trees, repairing sidewalks, painting crosswalks, and installing bicycle racks and benches at two of the G1 bus stops on Sumner Avenue.

During the spring, CCS repaired a section of sidewalk along Parkwood Street and planted 47 trees. The CCS Board authorized \$500 for watering the trees, ten gallons for each tree, three times over the course of the summer. Despite these efforts, seven trees died and six trees were vandalized. Other work included grinding 35 tree stumps.

The following spring (2011), CCS planted another 34 "well constructed" trees and installed three bicycle racks. CCS was able to transfer two of the artist-designed bus stop benches from the Quadrangle to the "X." The benches were created for the Pioneer Valley Transit Authority (PVTA) as part of a "Butt Stop Art" transportation enhancement project for the G1 Bus Route, but never installed.<sup>21</sup> The Neighborhood Centers Grant enabled CCS to partially finish the PVTA project. A mosaic and concrete Taj Mahal Tribute bench designed by Cynthia Fisher was placed at a bus stop on Sumner Avenue near Ormond Street and a painted resin and concrete bench by Nora Valdez was installed at a stop near Parkwood Street.



*Sumner Avenue Taj Mahal Tribute bus stop bench: Paul Hetzel photo 2020.*

## Encouraging Home Ownership

Ron Davis had an idea to create more home ownership in the Revere Street neighborhood where there were a few empty lots, and Russ Seelig got involved. In October 2015, they met with Jennifer Schimmel, Executive Director of the Greater Springfield Chapter of Habitat for Humanity, to discuss building houses on the empty lots. Her reaction was positive, but money was needed. CCS offered \$5,000 to jump-start the project and a few months later, in early 2016, Davis and Seelig participated in a meeting about the project at Trinity Church on Sumner Avenue. Davis introduced the group, Seelig discussed CCS and its goals, Schimmel showed plans for the houses and provided background on the Section 8 funds that would aid the purchase, and a colleague added operational details. Attendance was modest, but the word was out. Fundraising continued until November 2017 when the project was put on-hold, unfortunately.

It took a few more years, but Davis's efforts led to the groundbreaking for two new single-family homes on Revere Street and Grand Street in 2019. The houses are under construction as of this writing. Davis, also actively involved with a local crime watch group, serves as a "watchman" for the street

## Awards and Acknowledgements

*Springfield City Council, Proclamation recognizing, honoring and commending CCS members (pictured below: Sheila McElwaine, Pat Triggs at podium, Bill Malloy, Mary Ann Maloney, Ron Davis and Russ Seelig) and volunteers for their dedication and commitment to combating blight and improving the quality of life in the Forest Park neighborhood, October 24, 2011.*

*Springfield Preservation Trust, 2012 Preservation Award, 115 Sumner Avenue.*

*Springfield Preservation Trust, 2015 Preservation Award, 54 Fairfield Street.*



*Springfield City Council Acknowledgement: Jeremy Cole Photo 2011.*

## Source Notes and Additional Comments

<sup>1</sup> Concerned Citizens for Springfield, Inc., Minutes, May 13, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Mayor Michael J. Albano presented the first-ever Mayor's Neighborhood Improvement Award to CCS for its work on this project. The date was May 3, 1999. In addition, CCS received a Springfield Preservation Trust Award For Compatible New Construction for the design of 233 Belmont Avenue.

<sup>3</sup> Springfield's Zoning Ordinances do not allow a building permit for a non-conforming building that has been abandoned for more than two years. Neighbors knew that this building had been abandoned for longer than that. The fire occurred in 1993.

<sup>4</sup> CCS Minutes, February 28, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> The two-family house at 16-18 Orange Street, designed by John L. Tracy, received a Springfield Preservation Trust Award For Architectural Significance in 2003.

<sup>6</sup> The Landlord Training Program is now offered annually by Way Finders, a Springfield-based not-for-profit.

<sup>7</sup> This training is now provided by Way Finders.

<sup>8</sup> Refer to pp. 44 and 55.

<sup>9</sup> CCS received a Springfield Preservation Trust Award for the renovation of 134 Forest Park Avenue in spring 2010.

<sup>10</sup> This transaction was reported in the January 1, 2002 issue of the *Union-News* along with some background. BMC acquired the property, a half-way house, as part of a merger with Alcohol and Rehabilitation Services. The value of the property at the time of the merger was \$120,000. CCS sold the property in 2005 for \$283,000.

<sup>11</sup> CCS Minutes, December 16, 2005.

<sup>12</sup> CCS Minutes, April 23, 2001.

<sup>13</sup> CCS Minutes, December 9, 2004.

<sup>14</sup> Hilton Abbott, *UNLESS: A Study in Neighborhood Activism* (Springfield, MA: Concerned Citizens for Springfield, Inc., 2018), 28.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>16</sup> *The Republican* (Springfield, MA), June 25, 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Louis F. Newman was the general manager of the Forest Park Heights company, formed in 1893. The company's area of focus was the land south of Sumner Avenue and adjacent to Forest Park. Between 1893 and 1904, Newman supervised the construction of approximately 100 homes.

<sup>18</sup> 115 Sumner Avenue was the first vacant house to be put into receivership by the City of Springfield. Previously, the City placed properties in receivership after the owner had not met his or her financial or other obligations.

<sup>19</sup> Caron Management received a Springfield Preservation Trust Award for restoration of 116-120 Longhill Street in September 2020. Ms. Caron acknowledged the assistance of CCS members Bill Malloy, Russ Seelig and John Young who served on the Board.

<sup>20</sup> The bank set a high minimum bid of \$125,000 for its auction of 163 Pineywoods Avenue. When the minimum bid was topped, the auctioneer announced an anonymous "accelerated" bid of \$195,000. An accelerated bid? \$195,000 for a dilapidated house? The anonymous bidder turned out to be the mortgage holder and the bid of \$195,000 was the value of the mortgage, evidently. The auctioneer commented that she had seen such tactics before!

A few months later, the bank turned to Hubzu, an online real estate auctioneer, to manage the sale of 163 Pineywoods Avenue. Hubzu is a division of Altisource, the property management company "protecting" the property... the company responsible for the shoddy work undertaken without a building permit. Online real estate auctions appear to function differently in that there is a "minimum bid" and an undisclosed "reserve" price. This means that winning bids don't necessarily result in ownership... the reserve price enables the seller to negotiate with the bidder.

Four auctions later, 163 Pineywoods Avenue sold on June 25, 2020, about a month after the close of the auction. The purchase price was \$114,749, somewhat higher than the buyer's "winning" bid of \$95,000 which was also the minimum bid.

<sup>21</sup> In 2003, the PVTA commissioned several artists to create a dozen "Butt Stop Art" benches to be placed along the G1 Bus Route through downtown Springfield and along Sumner Avenue. The project was funded by a Federal Transit Enhancement Grant. The PVTA displayed all of the benches on the Quadrangle Green as part of a public unveiling in June 2004, and then the project stalled.

## Concerned Citizens For Springfield, Inc. Membership

Attilio Cardaropoli  
Jeremy Cole (charter member)  
Tania Colon  
Elizabeth Contant (secretary)\*  
Robert Dashevsky\*  
Ronald Davis\*  
Timothy Fitzpatrick  
Ronald Gaudette (charter member)  
Linda Gebo  
Steven Graham (charter member)  
Amy Gustman\*  
Scott Hanson  
Clarabel Hernandez  
William Malloy  
Mary Ann Maloney (treasurer)\*  
Jennifer Markey\*  
Sheila McElwaine\*  
Paul Martin\*  
Nancy Moriarty\*  
Thomas Moriarty\*  
Lyn Nolan  
Belle Rita Novak  
Catherine Orellana\*  
Rosemary Sandlin  
Paul Sears (charter member)  
Russell Seelig (charter member)\*  
Deborah Shea\*  
Annette Slap (charter member)  
Steve Slap (charter member)  
Ronald Smith  
Michael Thomes  
Patricia Triggs (charter member and long-time president)\*  
John Young (charter member)\*

\* current member

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Several long-time CCS members shared their records and made this writing possible, including Bill Malloy, Paul Sears, Russ Seelig and Pat Triggs. In addition, Bob Dashevsky, Bill Malloy, Mary Ann Maloney and Paul Martin provided comments that helped me to clarify some of the project descriptions. Special thanks to Russ Seelig for his encouragement and support. Seelig's editorial assistance and insights have been invaluable and this overview is improved because of his involvement. Thank you.

Photographs: Paul Hetzel provided contemporary photos of CCS projects. Jeremy Cole, Bill Malloy and Russ Seelig contributed historical images of events, activities and projects.

Layout: Carol de Carlo.

## About the Author

Deborah Shea retired in December 2014 and returned to Western Massachusetts following a 25-year career as an archives consultant in New York City. Shea and her husband Lou Harm bought a house in the Cozy Corner and discovered a welcoming neighborhood and a beautiful park. Her involvement with a group of neighborhood activists, Concerned Citizens for Springfield, Inc., led to researching and writing this overview.



*Paul Hetzel photo 2020.*