



The Creamery: A Homegrown, Hometown Project

By Zinta Aistars

When Kelly Clarke, executive director of Kalamazoo County Land Bank, went on her first property visit in 2010, she found a long-abandoned, decaying building with shattered windows on the corner of Portage and Lake Streets. The building had once housed the Klover Gold Creamery Company, but now it housed nothing but abandoned furniture, litter, and rodents.

Clarke immediately felt the property was important given its visible location on Portage Road. The Kalamazoo County Land Bank, or KCLB, created in 2009, repurposes and renews blighted property, bringing old buildings back to new life or, where not possible, clearing away abandoned buildings and replacing them with new developments that add value to the surrounding community.

"It was one of the first properties we looked at when KCLB was new," Clarke said. "Kids would walk around the building on their way to and from school in the Edison area. It wasn't safe and had a lot of challenges. After a structural assessment revealed significant issues, we thought it would be best to demolish the building and do an environmental clean-up."

Before the building was gone and the parcel cleaned up, Clarke and her staff decided to take a unique approach before making decisions on next steps. They partnered with the Edison Neighborhood Association and called a series of community meeting.

"The Land Bank foresaw that the parcel's prime location had the potential to provide valuable, close-to-home

opportunities for the Edison neighborhood," Clarke said. "Prior to the building's demolition in 2011, Byce & Associates and OCBA, Inc. volunteered to facilitate a pro bono charette with the Land Bank and the Edison Neighborhood Association. We invited residents to share what they desired for the lot. This was our first exercise in facilitating resident visioning for abandoned parcels. It's an approach we have followed ever since, a strategy that allows us to enable residents to both influence and benefit from the redevelopment plan."

About a hundred area residents attended the series of meetings, Clarke says, and the response was enthusiastic. One suggestion for the property rose to the top—like a layer of cream. Residents wanted an attractive, mixed-use building that would include mixed-income, affordable housing on the upper floors and commercial uses on the first floor. The Land Bank prepared a simple Request for Proposals that provided this vision and invited developers to respond.

It was time for Matt Hollander, president of the Hollander Development Corporation, to get involved. To realize the kind of development the community wanted to see, Hollander joined forces with Dr. Grace Lubwama, chief executive officer of Kalamazoo's YWCA.

"We made our proposal based on the community input in 2015," Hollander said. "It took us another four years to get financing in place. A developer's job is to find the right investors, like the producer of a movie, so we are usually the first ones in on a project and the last ones out."

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Such a complex, multi-use project was challenging, but Hollander stitched together nine layers of financing to move the project forward.

For the YWCA, the project was a perfect fit for the organization's mission—eliminating racism and empowering women.

"One of the YWCA's four strategic focus areas is to improve the lives of children," Lubwama said. "I can remember moving to Kalamazoo as a single mother raising two boys. I was more privileged than many, but still, I needed help."

Lubwama remembered that feeling, that need, and when she heard about the Creamery project, she understood what would mean most to families in the Edison area.

"To have the convenience of a 24-hour childcare center, open every day of the week, I believe we may be the first such place in Michigan and perhaps even in the country," she said.

The new building will have 48 affordable housing units. The YWCA Edison Children's Center will bring the only 24-hour, drop-in and 2nd/3rd shift childcare to the community as well as expand infant and toddler early learning—a very attractive option for those living in the units.

"Presently, we have a waiting list of 200 children for childcare," Lubwama said. "Pregnant women are signing up six months before birth, because there is such a need. Ninety percent of children living in low-income neighborhoods in Kalamazoo do not have access to high-quality childcare nor early learning programming, which makes them less likely to be prepared to meet important benchmarks upon entering kindergarten."

The new Children's Center will have space for 126 children.

Equally important, Lubwama said, is to provide employment to Edison area women, involving them in the growth of their community. The Childcare Center will employ approximately 30 childcare workers, 15 of which will be professionally trained through an apprenticeship pilot program that will certify the new employees as early learning childhood professionals. The YWCA will recruit from the Edison neighborhood to fill 15 of the staff positions.

"We want to empower and impact the women of the Edison neighborhood, and not just with childcare," added Lisa Rodriguez, vice president of development at YWCA. "We will be partnering with area agencies early in 2021 to recruit employees."

The two-story Childcare Center will have a nature-based playground with nature exploration landscaping, including a garden area and a water feature. The center will include a centralized kitchen to prepare meals for the children.

"Research shows that nature helps to calm and soothe children," Rodriguez said. "Especially those children who have been diagnosed with ADHD—attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. By exposing all children to these nature experiences, we hope to see restorative properties in their executive functioning; this is key in ameliorating the symptoms of ADHD."

"The first three years of brain development are transformative. Research has proven that during this interval, the brain's development builds a foundation for future learning capabilities and overall health and well-being. Even the earth tone color palette we have chosen for our interior spaces will be comforting. This is all part of our comprehensive program that will help children become kindergarten-ready."

By August 2020, the new Creamery building was nearly complete, open for its first tour by KCLB staff. It is scheduled to open to the public at the beginning of 2021. The project cost \$14.7 million and the three-story building is on track to achieve LEED Platinum Certification, which would make it one of only two such certified buildings in Kalamazoo.

"By August, we had already received 30 inquiries for the housing units," Hollander said. "Even though we had yet to advertise it. Our goal is to make our residents happy and offer great customer service—we will have a full-time manager on site."

The Creamery project has been a hometown, hometown project, Hollander said, meeting local needs and responding to local input. He acknowledged the many partners to bring the project to fruition: the Local Initiatives Support Group, the Edison Neighborhood Association, City of Kalamazoo, Michigan State Housing Development Authority, Michigan Economic Development Corporation, TCF Bank, Byce & Associates, OCBA, Frederick Construction, YWCA Kalamazoo, Kalamazoo County Land Bank, and others.