

4B

PUBLIC OUTREACH

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Photo Credit: Planning Department

4B.1 INTRODUCTION

The City of Albany wanted to ensure that extensive public engagement was undertaken as part of the Strategic Plan Update planning process. The city's Department of Planning and Development worked closely with the project team to conduct a series of group and individual stakeholder interviews. The purpose of these meetings was to listen, make sure that stakeholders had a voice in the planning process, and establish trust. Stakeholders were invited to discuss the implementation status of the Capital South Plan recommendations as well as current neighborhood strengths, needs, and opportunities.

4B.2 STAKEHOLDER IDENTIFICATION

The Department of Planning worked with the project team to identify key stakeholders in the South End. The list includes representatives from the public sector, not for profit organizations, businesses, and neighborhood groups.

Key South End Stakeholders:

1. Albany County Legislature
2. Albany Law School Community Development Clinic
3. Albany Housing Authority (AHA)
4. Albany Police Athletic League (PAL)
5. AVillage; South End Night Market

The purpose of these meetings was to listen, make sure that stakeholders had a voice in the planning process, and establish trust. Stakeholders were invited to discuss the implementation status of the 2007 Capital South Plan recommendations as well as current neighborhood strengths, needs, and opportunities.

6. African American Cultural Center
7. 518 S.N.U.G.
8. City of Albany Building & Regulatory Compliance
9. City of Albany Common Council
10. City of Albany, Corporation Counsel
11. City of Albany Equity & Community Engagement Coordinator
12. City of Albany Police Department
13. Giffen Memorial Elementary School
14. Grand Street Community Arts Center
15. Capital Region Workforce Improvement Board
16. Workforce Development Institute
17. NYS Homes & Community Renewal
18. South End Community Collaborative (SECC)

19. South End Improvement Corporation (SEIC)
20. South End Neighborhood Association (SENA)
21. Trinity Alliance of the Capital Region
22. Siena College; Ruth Kassel
23. South End Children's Café
24. Youth FX
25. Capitalize Albany
26. Port of Albany

In addition to stakeholder interviews, the City and project team participated in South End Community Collaborative, South End Neighborhood Association, and community events such as the South End Night Market to keep the public informed and collect additional information.



A word cloud depicting some of the common thoughts expressed during stakeholder interviews and community meetings.

4B.3 STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

The public outreach portion of the Strategic Plan Update was launched at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. To ensure that public engagement was conducted in a manner that was safe for everyone, stakeholder interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom calls. A key discovery made early on was the increased amount of connectivity that digital and hybrid meetings allowed. The Department of Planning used this to be able to leverage being more present for continued dialogue directly with organizations the South End interacted with regularly. The result was a successful experiment of public engagement where conversations are continual, rather than focused on individual meetings.

The Department of Planning prioritized attending regular meetings of the South End Community Collaborative and South End Neighborhood Association in the Fall of 2020. This allowed the department to gather feedback in real-time and

offer information where needed. While stakeholder interviews are officially part of the Strategic Plan Update, much consideration is given to the numerous attended meetings since the start of the continued neighborhood engagement strategy. Over the course of the plan's development 100 meetings were attended, this included meetings but also community events organized by South End organizations such as South End Community Collaborative, South End Neighborhood Association, AVillage's South End Night Market, 518 S.N.U.G., Bridge Tha Gap, Youth FX, African American Cultural Center and many others.

During the stakeholder interviews, each participant was asked to introduce themselves and their organization, business, or agency, describe what roles or responsibilities their organization has in relation to the South End, and discuss what is currently working and not working in the neighborhood.

When the interviews were complete, the project team reviewed the information and started to

identify common themes that emerged across the various stakeholder groups. The emerging themes, as well as specific concerns and ideas, were key considerations for all aspects of the strategic plan update.

The common themes that emerged during the public engagement process include:

- Community capacity
- Community projects
- Quality of life

4B.4 KEY FINDINGS BY THEME

The stakeholder interviews yielded rich and well-rounded input on neighborhood priorities and opportunities in the South End. Many participants expressed appreciation at being invited to share their concerns and ideas early in the planning process.

Frequently mentioned assets and positive features of the South End include, “good people who want to help,” “a beautiful neighborhood with many friendships,” the neighborhood’s historic architecture, the diverse mix of existing organizations, and partnership opportunities.

The interviews also provided critical insights into several key issues facing the neighborhood including long-lasting impacts of “redlining,” the need for increased homeownership opportunities, more affordable housing, the need for jobs, the high cost of living, and the need for more financial investment and funding support from the city.

Provided below is an overview of comments by emerging theme. Comments are organized by strengths, concerns, and opportunities/ideas that were raised by the stakeholders. The comments are represented in the speaker’s own words, where available.

Community Capacity

Based on feedback provided during the stakeholder interviews, it is clear that one of the South End’s greatest strengths is the commitment and passion of residents and organizations that want to see the South End return to being a neighborhood of choice. The South End has benefitted from grassroots efforts including, but not limited to, the creation of the South End Community Collaborative, the South End Night Market, and the South End Improvement Corporation.

The need for continued collaborative partnerships and enhanced organization capacity emerged as a common theme throughout most discussions with various stakeholder groups. Enhanced collaboration included fostering interdepartmental partnerships within City Hall, finding ways to connect city departments to local organizations and community groups, enhancing staff capacity and funding for not-for-profit organizations, as well as developing new partnerships and strengthening existing partnerships in the community.

COMMUNITY CAPACITY

SUMMARY OF COMMENTS

STRENGTHS

- South End Community Collaborative (SECC)
The organization was formed two years ago when representatives from AVillage, the Albany Housing Authority, SEIC, SENA teamed up to discuss issues and opportunities relating to housing, economic development, parks, crime, and health
During the pandemic, the group has continued to meet weekly via Zoom, with an average of 30 people in attendance
- SECC is an overarching organization that brings all entities together and city already participates at their weekly meetings
- SENA came to be as a result of a Capital South Plan. The group has been instrumental in keeping residents informed about community projects and giving them a voice.

CONCERNS

- The South End Advisory Committee, the group tasked with implementation of the 2007 plan, is no longer active
- So many disparate groups with crossover, but not a cohesive group. They tend to be splintered and underfunded.
- Staff and financial capacity is a huge issue in the South End
 - Half dozen not-for-profits struggling
 - City tendency was to take on tasks themselves as opposed to having neighborhood organizations doing it themselves
 - Particular to SEIC – funding needs to be increased to a level where they can make a difference and not have to scramble for grants
- No strategy and no coordination within the philanthropic community. Somebody needs to lead. Division between County/City.
- SECC was meant to synergize efforts but everyone is all trying to just do work and cannot think about working together. Historically the relationship between development corps and city and it was unclear regarding who was doing what. The city has historically tried to do things themselves instead of paying a development corporation to do the work. Clarification of roles would help. SEIC must figure out a way to do development instead of constantly scrambling for grants.

OPPORTUNITIES / IDEAS

- To be effective, Albany County needs to be engaged
- Departments within City Hall should meet quarterly to discuss shared projects, including CDBG funding, Lincoln Park improvements.
- Staff from the Albany Department of Planning and Development should continue to participate in SECC and SENA meetings to share information and serve as a liaison to City Hall
- Create a directory of South End organizations. Something that you can hand to an organization that is doing work in the South End. The directory would provide contact information of potential partners like the Salvation Army, South End Café, Mission, SEIC, SECC, SENA, etc.
- An Affordable Housing Committee should be created. Members would include representatives from local government, the Albany Housing Authority, the Albany County Land Bank, the Albany Department of Planning and Development, local Realtors, and lending institutions.
- City Planning should have a strong seat at the ACDA table to help inform the targeted distribution of CDBG funding based on planning documents.

Community Projects

Since adoption of the Capital South Plan, there have been a number of successful public and private redevelopment initiatives. Provided below is a summary of strengths, issues and opportunities identified during the public engagement process.

COMMUNITY PROJECTS	
SUMMARY OF COMMENTS	
STRENGTHS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • South End Development – The 76 Project <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - South End natives Corey Jones and Jahkeen Hoke are leading the project - Located at Krank and Leonard Streets, 76 2nd Ave - Equality, make things that last, environmentally sustainable - Large number of companies working alongside of Corey - 200 mixed-income market rate housing units/apartments - 60% affordable, 10% senior apartments - Create 150 permanent jobs, 1,000 construction jobs • The CDTA #100 bus line • The section of South Pearl between Downtown and Second Ave is ripe for a new plan and also has a surprising amount of energy already. South of Second Ave, a real opportunity exists to development a green tech corridor leading up to port. Especially if Ezra Prentice is razed. • Successful South End Night Market • Housing Authority - Creighton Story, Lincoln, Ezra • Reimagine Steamboat urban plan
CONCERNS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need to address lack of jobs in South End • DMV site languishing • A lot of organizations are looking for more space. This is a common problem in the city of Albany; conversation with college of nanoscale science to form partnership but there's no space. • Concern that the Albany Housing Authority put great investment into the South End and private investment didn't follow
OPPORTUNITIES / IDEAS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that current zoning ordinance supports projects and recommendations • With the new BRT system, transit oriented development (TOD) has to be a priority • DMV Capital South Square site is a huge opportunity • Urban living that doesn't require a car, located near CDTA BRT • Renovate the historic public pool into a recreation center • Expand the South End Market to a permanent space with local vendors

Quality of Life

For the purpose of this update, stakeholder feedback regarding housing, parks and recreation, historic preservation, crime, the arts, and streetscape enhancements are considered factors contributing to the quality of life for South End residents. One of the quality of life topics that was discussed identified by every stakeholder group was the need to increase homeownership rates in the South End. Residents, not for profits and government agencies all agreed that it is hard to stabilize neighborhoods if you are not talking about homeownership.

Quality of life strengths identified by the

stakeholders include the neighborhood's historic architecture, walkability, Lincoln Park, community gardens, and homeownership improvement programs administered by the SEIC.

Some of the concerns raised by stakeholders include the need for a greater variety of housing options for residents, and the fact that there are a lot of homeownership programs available, but it is difficult for the average person to navigate the system and put together the down payment needed to buy a home.

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QUALITY OF LIFE

SUMMARY OF COMMENTS

STRENGTHS

- Albany County Land Bank
- The South End Improvement Corporation has funds available for homeowners to make necessary updates to their homes
- Steamboat Square
- Bike/Ped Master Plan
- Police Athletic League programs
- The SeeClickFix.com website provides residents with an easy way to bring community issues to the attention of city departments
- YouthFX is a great program that provides young people of color with media education and empowerment through film
- South End Spotlights
 - Lincoln Park
 - Hispanic Food Market on Eagle – Regional stop
 - The John B. Howe Branch Library
 - Schuyler Mansion State Historic Site
 - Community Gardens
 - South End–Groesbeckville Historic District
 - Grand St Community Arts

CONCERNS

- Low homeownership rates
- The City has a lot of programs available and posted on their website, but it is difficult to navigate existing housing programs and put a package together to get enough money to buy a home
- For any programs, we have to be sensitive to how people are engaged and do not put up red flags or use buzz words that makes them afraid that they are going to hear ‘no’ just like so many times before. They don’t want to experience failure like before.
- The City hasn’t done anything to market the South End as a neighborhood
- SEIC is hampered by lack of funds and limited staff capacity
- There is a disconnect between the actions of the land bank and black residents being able to get these properties, they can’t access buildings
- Transitional and affordable housing options are needed
- Black entrepreneurs say they can’t rent a store front in the South End
- Job training is needed
- A lot of people this it is “not sexy” to propose trades
- Part of problem of South End is perception of the violence; Feel like it is making progress, but now current shootings has set it back
- Regarding the violence, there has always been a perception that it is not safe – and then just as we start to overcome – the violence starts again. It makes things much more difficult, when you see reports of violence in the South End, it does not matter how isolated the incident, it disparages the image.
- Plenty of neighborhood watch groups in the City, but not in the South End
- People are tired of ‘over-policing’ – but the City must respond to data
- There is a historic treasure in the South End that should be on the National map and it’s not
- Sidewalks are overgrown in South End
- Areas of green that are now paved

QUALITY OF LIFE

SUMMARY OF COMMENTS

OPPORTUNITIES / IDEAS

- Want to see a revolving loan program to buy homes
- Need financial aid/grants/low interest loans to purchase/rehab homes
- Community Gardens - SENM on Thursdays, if we can expand the community gardens to vacant lots it could be a source of business for someone. There's something for the environment. It's also an educational opportunity for young and old alike. How to grow and provide your own - Particularly fresh vegetables in a food desert. You can't get it here. The stores are making a greater effort at providing fresh vegetables. That's good to see.
- Partner with the Albany Police Department Community Resource Officer to establish a South End Neighborhood Watch Program
- Use environmental design techniques like cutting bushes back in areas where people congregate to prevent crime.
- A central activity thaws relations between people, and the activity is centered around the people on a micro local level. If we introduce more ways that people can exhibit efforts and rouse interest for people to venture from "scary" parts or venture into "scary" parts, this could help thaw relations. Vacant lots under city/ACLB ownership could be used as semi-permanent exhibition/market space. Expand the South End Market to a permanent space with local vendors.
- Change the conversation about the South End. Could be internal and external. Communication is not the newspaper anymore, its sound bites on social media and TV now and the narrative must be a master craft.
- Include waterfront access for South End residents
- The trolley used to go to historic sites, and it never came into the South End. The area is historic, why not cover all those streets that make up the historic area so people can see that it is not as dangerous as perceived.
- There is a need for a community center in the South End but Giffen School isn't the place – they just don't have the capacity
- I look at a community center as a family life center. I want to encompass need of youngest to oldest in community. We don't have a senior services center in Albany. That's a separate need but at the same time, if I'm talking about a family life center – I'm talking about daycare to elder care and all in between. That's how you sustain the community. If you're keeping the family together. You have people that can provide services across the whole spectrum of the family in the building. Not just a gym with basketball and a couple classrooms.
- Reinstate "Block of the Year" Program
- Simple neighborhood beautification activities like fresh paint and cut lawns instill a sense of pride among residents.
- South Pearl Street has lost its own character. Today you see large CDTA bus stops. I think that it's a corridor – a major one. It has a strong history. There used to be businesses galore, and now it just seems like an afterthought with dollar stores here and there. I want to see it as a major business corridor. Those stores provide a real service to community but I don't think that corridor from Hudson to Second is appreciated.
- I'd like to see South Pearl Street highlighted with some banners. Just like the Christmas or Delaware have street pole flags. You gotta give people pride in place. Right now, I don't think that's there.
- Someone put a beautiful flower garden at South Pearl and Fourth Street. I've admired it but I don't know who did it. Markers such as that along the corridor could revive pride in place.
- There are a lot of vacant buildings. Until we find investment in those buildings, we have to invest in infrastructure. What I'm saying for that corridor could be utilized on Clinton St, some of those side streets where people reside.
- Morton Ave is a central corridor and it runs along the beautiful Lincoln Park, how do we highlight that? I grew up going to that park as a child and I have renewed love for the park because I walk there on a regular basis when it's nice. I'd like to highlight natural resources in the communities.

4B.5 COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Development and implementation of the Capital South Plan relied heavily on the professionals and neighborhood advocates that served on the South End Action Committee. Over time, the group dissolved and the majority of recommendations went unrealized.

The Strategic Plan Update focuses on realistic, achievable, and feasible recommendations that are within the means of the Department of Planning, with the support of community partners including public agencies and not-for-profits that serve the South End.

Public Agencies

A list of potential partners is provided below.

Albany Community Development Agency (ACDA)

Albany County Department of Economic Development, Conservation and Planning

Albany County Legislature

Albany Housing Authority (AHA)

Capital District Regional

Economic Development Council (CRREDC)

The Port of Albany–Rensselaer (Albany Port District Commission)

City of Albany Common Council

City of Albany Department of Buildings and Regulatory Compliance (BRC)

City of Albany Department of General Services (DGS)

City of Albany Department of Recreation

City of Albany Equity Agenda Advisory Committee

City of Albany Historic Resources Commission (HRC)

Giffen Memorial Elementary School

NYS Department of State (DOS)

NYS Housing and Community

Not for Profits

Renewal (HCR)

African American Cultural Center

Albany County Land Bank (ACLB)

Albany Community Land Trust (ACLT)

AVillage, Inc.

Albany Police Athletic League

Albany Youthbuild

Capital City Rescue Mission

Capitalize Albany Corporation

Capital Region Workforce Investment Board

Grand Street Community Arts

Habitat for Humanity Capital District

South End Children's Café

South End Neighborhood

Association (SENA)

Sound End Improvement Corporation (SEIC)

Trinity Alliance

YouthFX

Building Blocks Together

518 S.N.U.G.

The Community Builders Inc.

Private Sector

South End Development

Community banks

Local Realtors