

# Urban Land Protection Case Study

## LAWRENCE, MASSACHUSETTS

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### City Profile

Lawrence, MA is a small “gateway city” located 25 miles north of Boston on the Merrimack River. With a land area of just 7 square miles, Lawrence is a diverse, densely populated urban community of 72,000 people in the midst of the predominantly rural and suburban Merrimack Valley region. The city is host to a variety of regional services, including government agencies, a district courthouse, transportation facilities, and a mix of commercial, manufacturing, industrial, and small start-up business activities. Lawrence is easily accessible to nearby communities and urban centers by virtue of its proximity to Interstates 495 and 93, State Routes 28, 110, and 114, and the MBTA Commuter Rail’s Haverhill line, which provides a link with Boston’s North Station.

Lawrence has long been known as the Immigrant City—an industrial center rich in ethnic diversity, history, and culture. First settled in 1708, Lawrence was a farming area until it was incorporated as a City in 1853, and was built by entrepreneurs from the Essex Company eager to harness the power of the Merrimack River for textile manufacturing. Within three years of acquiring land from neighboring towns, the Essex Company built extensive and lasting infrastructure, including the Great Stone Dam, two canals, the Pemberton Reservoir, fifty brick buildings, a large boarding house, and four textile mills. A total of six parks were given to the City by the Essex Company and by 1924 the City had 185 acres of parks and playsteads. Lawrence’s dense, urban fabric was well-established by this time, leaving a legacy that still defines the look and feel of the city today.

By the early 1900s, Lawrence was the world’s leading manufacturer of woolen textiles, and the demand for labor in the city’s vast mills attracted immigrants from across the world. However, Lawrence’s textile industry dominance was short-lived. The introduction of synthetic fibers in the 1940s and the migration of textile mills away from New England led to a dramatic decline in jobs and population. By 1950, Lawrence had lost more than 20,000 manufacturing jobs. The city’s population went into a steep decline, from a peak of nearly 100,000 in 1920 to approximately 63,000 by 1980. Today, Lawrence’s population has bounced back with a majority Latino population hailing primarily from the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico. This influx of new residents is helping to recharge the city’s economy, bringing new life to neighborhoods that were nearly abandoned over two decades ago. At the 2000 Census, Lawrence was among the youngest communities in the state, with nearly half its population under the age of 24. This demography has intensified the demand for open space and recreational amenities, especially among children and teenagers.

With four newly-developed open spaces constructed since 2006, the City of Lawrence parks system is now comprised of **41 publicly owned parks totaling more than 275 acres of open space**. Approximately **half of these parks are less than two acres in size**. Lawrence is also home to a network of



YouthBuild Lawrence is an important partner in GWL’s GreenStreets tree planting program. These young people earn their GED’s while learning job skills and improving their community.

underutilized alleyways that comprise over two acres of open space in or near the downtown core. Groundwork Lawrence’s growing network of community gardens add a food security dimension to the mix of the city’s green space with cultivable soils safe for gardening fruits and vegetables for personal and familial consumption.

By virtue of its history and context, Lawrence holds numerous opportunities for creating additional ambient assets with **hundreds of vacant lots and underutilized alleyways across the city, three rivers running through several of its neighborhoods**, a compact urban scale, and a community requesting the development of more riverfront trails and gardens during public meetings for the City’s 2009 Open Space and Recreation Plan renewal process. At the same time, **Lawrence’s open spaces are poised to impact its residents’ health and well-being**: through the continued regeneration of its built environment with an eye toward sustainability and community health, **Groundwork Lawrence (GWL) aims to address Lawrence’s disproportionately high rates of diet and lifestyle-related diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, and obesity**. Bodegas (corner stores) and liquor stores are ubiquitous, particularly in the city’s poorest neighborhoods, and serve as primary sources of sustenance that fuel unhealthy habits. Walking audits conducted by members of GWL’s high school Green Team program illustrate the need for more pedestrian-oriented improvements such as dedicated walkways, cross-walks, sidewalk repairs, and enforcement of snow-shoveling ordinances, all of which could be incorporated into the city’s future economic development plans.

## Urban Open Space Context

### INDUSTRIAL AND POST-INDUSTRIAL LEGACY

Indeed, Lawrence's lowest-income neighborhoods— primarily comprised of young Latino families— face a host of additional burdens, especially environmental justice issues; that is, they experience a disproportionate share of burden in terms of vacant, contaminated, underutilized, derelict, and illegally dumped-upon land in their neighborhoods compared with those living in even moderately more affluent Lawrence neighborhoods. At present, there are several hundred vacant, underutilized lots spread all across the City of Lawrence, though most are concentrated in Lawrence's lowest-income neighborhoods. Given Lawrence's extremely high rates of foreclosure, combined with the fact that development pressures in Lawrence are relatively low, compared with much of the greater Boston region, **open space planning appears to be of strong interest to the community at large, though limited local resources and capacity are factors that have hindered active pursuit of a deliberate citywide vacant lot agenda.**

### THE PUBLIC HEALTH DIMENSION

Less often discussed than vacancy and the foreclosure crisis, but equally devastating, is the fact that increasing numbers of Lawrence's low-income residents are saddled with the overlapping challenges of hunger, food insecurity, and their resulting impacts on health and wellness. Already vulnerable to unexpected life events such as sudden illness, job loss, and fluctuations in food or utility prices, along with the neighborhood instability that comes with vacant neighborhood properties, Lawrence's low-income families have long been facing **higher-than-average diet-related health issues** including Type II diabetes, obesity, and coronary heart disease. As the foreclosure crisis and struggling economy continues to

bear down on society, families are growing even more vulnerable due to their the inability to meet their basic needs, which means they increasingly rely on food stamps and make cost-driven food consumption choices that negatively impact their health. While bellies may be filled with free or low-cost food, the nutritional value of these foods is extremely low while its cost to health is high—and this crisis is now reaching epidemic proportions. As families continue struggling to make ends meet, the ripple effects of consuming cheap, processed, high-calorie, low-nutrition foods will be seen in more frequent emergency room visits, more days out of work and school, and ultimately, shorter life spans, especially among members of our younger generations. **Transformation of vacant land into community gardens provide a promising opportunity to address these intertwined economic and wellness issues while also addressing vacancy challenges.**

## Land Trust Strategies

To confront these challenges, GWL has made a concerted effort to leverage its recent improvements to the built environment with quality **programming designed to encourage the peer-supported discovery, exploration, and pursuit of healthier habits, both from a food and fitness perspective.** As a local catalyst, collaborator, and leader improving the public realm and quality of life in Lawrence since 2001, GWL has worked arm-in-arm with local government, residents, institutions, and organizations on neighborhood planning and organizing activities, place-based projects, youth and community programming, and economic development and stewardship initiatives. To date, GWL has managed the design, construction, and/or renovation of over \$6M in public open space projects in cooperation with the City of Lawrence Community Development Department.



Groundwork Lawrence facilitated and organized community design charrettes for a new park on the Spicket River. The interactive session created the community design for Dr. Nina Scarito Park.



Dr. Nina Scarito Park was a mothballed brownfield in the city that was transformed into a 2 acre oasis on the Spicket River in 2006.

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Students participate in GWL's Eat Right/Move More schoolyard gardening program at the Leonard School garden which was installed during adjacent park renovations in 2007.

With this new healthy infrastructure in place, over the next five years GWL aims to leverage these place-based investments with programmatic strategies designed to support the building of residents' basic assets of health and wellness, which will ultimately help beautify neighborhoods and increase residents' ability to thrive and enjoy a better quality of life. By improving the community's most vulnerable low-income residents' health with better food and more physical activity, residents can build their wealth, knowledge, new habits, and a more interconnected community, especially in Lawrence's lowest-income areas. **In 2007, GWL created the subsidiary GWL Recreational Access, Inc. and became a Land Trust in order to help further stabilize underutilized land across Lawrence where vacant properties' best and highest uses are non-residential, nor commercially-oriented.** In spite of, and as a partial antidote to the home foreclosure crisis that has spread across neighborhoods in Lawrence, GWL has pursued public realm projects that are reclaiming vacant, underutilized spaces in our lowest-income areas, while at the same time meeting multiple bottom lines of environment, economy, equity, and health. For example, **GWL has enhanced Lawrence's livability by pursuing the following projects, programs, and initiatives:**

## BROWNFIELD-TO-PARK PROJECTS

**Dr. Nina Scarito Park** – A 2.7-acre site that stood vacant for nearly twenty years, "the Brook Street site" required six years of persistence to make Scarito Park a reality, as well as hundreds of people and scores of public agencies that were involved in decision-making, problem-solving, and troubleshooting to move the project forward. Throughout this time, GWL served as the catalyst and manager of the project, helping to coordinate community outreach; environmental investigation and remedial activities; site design and planning; legal and real estate transaction work; fundraising; project permitting; construction; and volunteer involvement. Thanks to the strong commitment and leadership of City and State officials, neighborhood residents, and Bank of America, Scarito Park is a

\$3M investment that stands today as a shining example of the value a beautiful, community-designed open space can bring to a neighborhood. Scarito was the first new park to be completed as part of the Spicket River Greenway and includes the City's first community garden.

**Manchester Street Park** – This park, which most recently housed a municipal trash incinerator, was a 5+ acre brownfield that has since 2002 stood as a vacant parcel situated along the banks of Lawrence's Spicket River at Stevens Pond, created in the late 1800s to power the many textile mills still standing in the district today. Envisioned by the community as the capstone park space along the developing Spicket River Greenway, GWL managed a multi-year community design and strategic planning process to reclaim the site as open space. The design plans that emerged from the community-driven process include a new playground, swings, community garden, a grassy open lawn, 80 trees, picnic spaces, parking area, and a portion of the Spicket River Greenway, as well as a dramatic pavilion overlook perched atop a residual concrete structure adjacent to Stevens Pond. The park opened September 2009 and includes GWL's third community garden site.

## VACANT LAND ENHANCEMENTS

**William Kennedy Community Park** – Long a flood-prone area on the banks of the Spicket River, this site had been inhabited by nearly 20 homes that were condemned and demolished by FEMA in the late 1990s after particularly acute recurring floods caused hundreds of thousands of dollars in damage to the homes. This park came online in summer 2007 following GWL's management of three-year negotiations and a lengthy community design process with the City of Lawrence and local stakeholders. Kennedy is now home to a new stretch of the Spicket River Greenway, and this one-acre park also includes play equipment for 2-5 and 5-12 year olds, benches, trash receptacles, a grassy open field, 16 new trees, dozens of shrubs, and interpretive signage about the river's ecological habitat and the historic development patterns surrounding it.



The CSA brings fresh fruits and vegetables to Lawrence and residents in need can take advantage of subsidized shares through GWL's Share-a-Share Program.

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**Misserville Skate Park** - Located adjacent to the Leonard Middle School, this newly refurbished city-owned park doubles as the school's playground. Following a design process that engaged the school's students, teachers, and administrators alongside neighborhood residents, Misserville includes such amenities as the city's first state-of-the-art skate park designed by local teens, a basketball court, a turf field, the city's first schoolyard garden beds in an outdoor classroom setting, 17 new trees, dozens of shrubs, benches, and trash receptacles. As a result of the site's redesign and reconstruction, impervious surfaces were reduced by 33%, allowing more surface water to percolate into the water table rather than compromise the water quality in our rivers.

**Union & Mechanic Alleyway Community Garden** – An illegally-dumped upon alleyway just over 300 feet long and 14 feet wide, the Union/Mechanic Alleyway stood as a symbol of underutilized and uncared for land in the heart of the city's most challenged neighborhood. By pursuing the alleyway's cleanup with cadres of residents and other volunteers, GWL set about leading a design process with adjacent gardeners who needed a safe space to garden in uncontaminated soils. Using a variety of low-impact development (LID) techniques, GWL managed several community build events to construct new garden beds, rain gardens, and a permeable patio to address both neighborhood food insecurity and stormwater flows that were causing marked erosion. GWL's first community garden, the Union/Mechanic Alleyway is owned and maintained by GWL's land trust subsidiary, GWL Recreational Access, and is utilized by a dozen resident gardeners and enjoyed by adjacent property owners and residents.

## PLANNING A MORE SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY

**The Spicket River Greenway** - GWL is managing the behind-the-scenes survey and design work for the Spicket River Greenway, designed to provide bike and pedestrian

transportation opportunities for residents (especially youth) traveling to and from school or work, provide for more riverside recreational amenities, and ultimately connect the green open spaces GWL has constructed, improved, and/or cared for along the Spicket River since GWL's incorporation.

**Walkable Neighborhoods** – GWL's advocacy for the inclusion of pedestrian-oriented improvements in upcoming Massachusetts Highway Department plans for the East Haverhill Street bridge reconstruction (located at a dangerous intersection with an odd configuration), provides much-needed input for how the community could enhance safety for pedestrians, especially for youth who frequent nearby amenities such as Our House Community Center and Dr. Nina Scarito Park. More broadly, and with an eye towards reclaiming the City's vast network of underutilized alleyways, GWL has been exploring opportunities in the Safe Routes to Schools program, as well as developing mapped walking loops and interpretive trails across the city that invite residents and visitors to better understand the city's natural habitats, industrial history, and cultural diversity.

**Community Garden Network** – In 2007 GWL established a Land Trust and acquired the Union/Mechanic Alleyway Community Garden. GWL's continued close work with staff members at the City's Planning and Community Development Departments have helped begin to catalyze a community dialogue about the conveyance of other vacant lots with low redevelopment potential to GWL's Land Trust for the development of a permanent community garden network in neighborhoods across the city. GWL is also exploring the possibility of the GWL Land Trust holding Conservation Restrictions on city-owned vacant lots-turned-community gardens to ensure a long-standing maintenance and oversight stake in these community garden sites.



"Reviviendo" mean rebirth and this mural is in the Union/Mechanic Alleyway Garden, GWL's first land acquisition as a Land Trust. The alleyway now provides fresh vegetables for ten families.



GWL continues to support and manage the city's growing network of community gardens in cooperation with the City's Planning and Community Development Departments.



Volunteers during the Spicket River Cleanup in 2007 took advantage of low water levels and tackled the build-up of debris at the mouth of the Spicket at the Merrimack River.

## CATALYZING COMMUNITY WELLNESS

**Community Gardening** – In two community gardens (Union/Mechanic Garden and Scarito Park Garden) GWL hosted over 65 individual, youth, and family community garden members during each of the 2007–2009 gardening seasons. In providing safe, uncontaminated gardening beds for our members, GWL is working to encourage greater local food production and wider growth and consumption of fruits and vegetables as a low-cost, healthy alternative to stretching the food budget with fast and/or processed foods. GWL’s third community garden, built through a successful volunteer community build event, is located at Manchester Street Park and includes almost 30 garden beds. Nearly half of the beds are being cultivated through a partnership with the Lawrence Alma Arlington Neighborhood Association which is utilizing the beds to cultivate food for over 30 families. We look forward to more than doubling the amount of community garden space in 2010–2011 with the City’s recent PARC grant funding which will enable an additional 3–5 gardens to be built on undevelopable vacant lots and managed by GWL.

**Schoolyard Gardening** – With the 2007 construction of garden beds at the Leonard School as part of the Misserville Skate Park reconstruction, GWL has struck a partnership with school administrators and teachers to begin implementing curriculum for engaging middle schoolers attending the Leonard in outdoor classroom activities associated with growing vegetables from seed to harvest. What we’ve learned is that while adult habits are hard to break, youth habits are easier to encourage if exposure to positive habits happens early. Our programming is being designed to dovetail with in-classroom lessons, and will be matched according to age and grade-appropriate State-mandated MCAS frameworks. This winter the City’s second schoolyard garden will be constructed at Cronin Park, which is utilized as a schoolyard by the adjacent Tarbox Elementary School, where GWL has begun developing and nurturing relationships with teachers, administrators, students, and the PTA.

## CULTIVATING STEWARDSHIP

Alongside our important project and program work described above, GWL continues to cultivate broader stewardship of our public spaces, thereby improving and stabilizing Lawrence’s neighborhoods. Through our grassroots efforts that engage residents of all ages in hands-on work to clean up vacant lots, alleyways, underutilized spaces, and new and existing parks, GWL is engaging residents in embracing a common sense of purpose for reclaiming our neighborhoods. In keeping with the broken windows theory (as first documented by Kelling and Wilson, the broken windows theory maintains that perceptions of social (dis)order are inextricably linked to the incidence (or lack) of crime and perceptions of safety in neighborhoods), if there is a sense in the neighborhood that someone (or many people) is looking after public spaces, residents tend to feel safer and more empowered to take steps to maintain common spaces, eliminate blight, and call the police to restore order when necessary.

## Our civic engagement and stewardship efforts include:

*The Spicket River Greenway Cleanup* happening each September, and *the Earth Day Cleanup* happening each April, are two flagship community events designed to engage residents in reclaiming public spaces for passive and active recreational use. In addition to periodic street, neighborhood, park, and alleyway cleanups, these large events engage over 600 people each year in tangible direct service to the community, which yields perceptible beautification in our most challenged neighborhoods, and increase residents’ appreciation for our green and open space assets. Our Green Team youth members have been instrumental in this civic engagement process—for both Cleanup events, the Green Team is responsible for recruiting and signing up their peers from local high schools as volunteers. At the 2009 Spicket River Cleanup alone, 350 students contributed a combined 1,750 volunteer



GWL works to engage residents of all ages - these young people show off their face paint decorations at the Harvest Festival celebrating the harvest of the Community Gardens.

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hours towards cleaning up the banks, parks, and vacant lots along the river, resulting in not only the removal of almost ten tons of debris, but a heightened sense of awareness, appreciation, and empowerment about maintaining clean and orderly open spaces in the community and minimizing litter and debris.

## Outcomes

Urban land reclamation, maintenance, and stewardship can yield significant positive outcomes. Below is a list of such benefits Groundwork Lawrence has seen and/or anticipates achieving over time through its **transformation and protection of vacant properties**:

***It encourages equitable redevelopment.*** In lower-income areas, development pressure is low; neighborhood-scale visioning for vacant lots meaningfully engages long-marginalized EJ neighborhoods.

***It improves public health and food security.*** Gardens provide low-cost fresh food options, especially in “food deserts.” Residents in poor neighborhoods (where vacant lots are prevalent) face higher rates of diet-related disease.

***It builds community and stewardship.*** Residents get to know each other during design process; provide “eyes” with frequent use of the new space.

***It stabilizes neighborhoods.*** Cleaning up eyesores sends a signal that crime is not welcome, that the neighborhood is cared for and orderly (broken windows theory).

***It demonstrates Best Management Practices.*** Lots reclaimed featuring LID techniques like rain gardens encourage sustainable redevelopment practices.

***It makes good economic sense.*** According to a study conducted at the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School:

- Cleaning and greening of vacant lots can increase adjacent property values by as much as 30%.
- Planting a tree within 50 feet of a house can increase its value by approximately 9%.
- Location of a house within 1/4 mile from a park increased values by 10%.
- Neighborhood blocks with higher concentrations of unmanaged vacant lots displayed lower house prices of approximately 18%.



Design option for Manchester Street Park created through the community design process in 2008. The park was completed in 2009 and serves as a capstone of the city’s developing Spicket River Greenway.



Groundwork Lawrence is a member of the **Urban Land Protection Council (ULPC)**, which also includes the Lowell Parks & Conservation Trust, The Greater Worcester Land Trust, and The Waltham Land Trust. **The Jessie B. Cox Charitable Lead Trust** has funded the ULPC to develop and enhance the collaborative efforts of the urban land protection community.



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