

Big Idea? *What's the*

At the invitation of the Ulmer & Berne law firm, URS took a close look at Cleveland's past, present and – most important – future. The study team emerged with transformational ideas to leverage our assets as never before. BY ROBERT SBERNA

Standing near the confluence of the Cuyahoga River and Lake Erie, Moses Cleaveland and his surveying party admired the surrounding area, imagining its rich potential. The lake and river would afford convenient shipping access for traders and the forested high bluffs offered protection against weather.

Cleaveland decided the location was ideally suited to serve as the “capital city” of the Connecticut Western Reserve. Over the next 160 years or so, his namesake city fulfilled its promise. An important mercantile hub in the early 1800s and an industrial powerhouse from the mid-19th century through the mid-20th century, the city's economic and cultural growth was robust for much of its history.

But in the 1970s, Cleveland's manufacturing base began a steady contraction, leading to a stagnant economy, urban decay, and a population that's declined to its present-day 431,000 from a 1950 peak of 913,000. As Cleveland continues the ponderous process of deindustrializing into a technological/service economy, civic and business leaders are turning to the city's innovators for strategies on how to strengthen neighborhoods

and revitalize the community.

Last year, a team of 11 senior professionals from URS Corp.'s Cleveland office accepted a novel challenge to collaboratively assess the city's weaknesses and strengths and then brainstorm methods of leveraging its key assets. Two centuries after Moses Cleaveland envisioned a thriving center of fur and agriculture trade, the URS team has reimagined his city, conceptualizing ideas that can make it more entrepreneurial, sustainable and desirable.

The team members unleashed their collective insight and creativity in two dozen after-work sessions, which yielded a list of 20 broad-stroke ideas that include linking the planned casino to other downtown attractions, developing and livening waterfront areas, increasing family housing products in University Circle, and promoting the Warehouse district and other downtown entertainment venues while making them more family-friendly.

Among the ideas were these three that *Neoeconomist* found particularly intriguing:

- ➔ **Redeveloping commercial buildings on the Lake Erie bluffs and reinventing the East Shoreway as a landscaped parkway, with an objective of utilizing these assets to lure corporations to the area.**
- ➔ **Improving and expanding Cleveland's parkland.**

➔ **Expanding Cleveland State University and leveraging its growth to stimulate nearby development.**

About the Study

The pro bono study was spearheaded by Gary Hribar, manager of the Cleveland office of URS, a worldwide engineering design services firm that has a 50-year history of working with public and private sector clients in Northeast Ohio.

Hribar noted that his team's ideas all focused on enhancing quality of life, facilitating success, and nurturing connective tissue among Cleveland's neighborhoods and between corporations, residents and government agencies.

URS was invited to speak last November at the Deal Maker Forum, an annual event hosted by the Cleveland-based Ulmer & Berne law firm. The forum addresses important civic issues and attracts a broad spectrum of the real estate, business, banking, construction and government sectors of Northeast Ohio.

Hribar said he decided to propose a presentation that would shine a light on Cleveland's problems and provoke dialogue about the city's best opportunities for growth.

Craig Miller, a partner at Ulmer & Berne and an organizer of Deal Maker, was enthusiastic about Hribar's proposal, particularly because URS's long-term presence in Cleveland had provided it with a unique perspective on the city.

For help in developing his presentation, *Cleveland: What is Working? What is Next? A Fresh Perspective*, Hribar hand-selected a multidisciplinary team that included planners, economic development specialists, engineers, architects and an attorney.

"These were talented people who had worked on both sides of the development equation and had also directly worked for municipalities and economic development agencies," Hribar said. "We believed that by having people of various disciplines working on these problems, it would give us different viewpoints on solutions."

Hribar encouraged an unstructured, uninhibited approach to finding new ideas. "Anything was fair play to talk about. This was our own study, so there were no client parameters that would inhibit our thinking."

The Starting Point

The team's first step was to break Cleveland into districts and then evaluate each district on a 1 to 10 scale, with 1 being an area that is stressed with vacancies and declining values, and 10 being a vibrant, safe, investment-rich environment that is meeting its land use goals and objectives. With the members reaching consensus that Cleveland as a whole rated a 4, many other districts were rated at 4 and below — with Tower City/Public Square scoring 5, the Warehouse District earning 7, and the Cleveland Clinic and University Circle

The URS Plan



The URS study yielded 20 broad-stroke ideas that can spur Cleveland's economic vitality and livability. Three of the most promising ideas are (from top left, clockwise) 1. Expanding and developing the city's parks and public spaces; 2. Growing the Cleveland State University campus and its surrounding area; 3. Leveraging the commercial potential of the Lake Erie bluffs and redeveloping the East Shoreway into a landscaped parkway.

The URS Team



FIRST ROW: Ashley Alvin, Regional Director for Energy/Sustainability Services, URS Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, and Kentucky; Tom Denbow, Director of Water Resources and Ecological Services, URS Cleveland; Christopher Diehl, Director of Design, URS Cleveland; Jeff Hormans, Senior Urban Planner for URS Cleveland

MIDDLE ROW: Gary F. Hribar, Head of URS Cleveland; Beth Kalapos, Registered Architect and Project Manager; Bill Mason, Director of the Facilities Business Line, URS Cleveland; Mike McKim, Environmental Geologist

BOTTOM ROW: M. Catherine Murray, Site Design Project Manager; Catherine Palko, Economic Development Strategist and Environmental Engineer; Nancy Sauer, Sustainability Committee Chairperson, URS Cleveland

districts earning 9 and 10 respectively.

In Hribar's view, it's important that community leaders view Cleveland as a holistic entity, rather than just focusing attention on the neighborhoods and projects that are successful. "If we can stop having the discussion that a single success is the answer and look at Cleveland in a more comprehensive way, then maybe we can bring the city up to an overall ranking of 9 or 10," he said.

Although Cleveland has a perception as an underdog city, Hribar said, "All of the data we dredged up was not negative. We found many positives, including the presence of great corporations here, a skilled labor force, sports teams, a multicultural population, decent housing stock, the West Side Market, and the revitalized Gordon Square District. Perhaps the most compelling find is that we have a strong heritage of philanthropy and a great museum district. The backbone of our culture is to support things. If we could channel those efforts into new development strategies, it would be great."

Nevertheless, the team found several disturbing trends, such as areas

Cleveland State University: A Catalyst for Growth

CSU's campus footprint and enrollment lags behind Ohio's other urban universities. Growing CSU will fuel development throughout midtown and downtown.

	Cleveland State University	OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY	UNIVERSITY OF Cincinnati	The University of Akron
County Population	1,275,709	1,150,122	855,062	542,405
College Population	16,000	64,077	41,357	29,251
On-Campus Residents	1,021	9,469	4,000	3,000
College Acreage	85 ac.	1,700 ac.	473 ac.	218 ac.

that are thriving next to stressed areas. "As an example, East Fourth Street is working but it is being negatively impacted by the bankruptcy of the nearby arcade. That's not normal and it's not desirable," Hribar said. "We also found many vacant streets and buildings, missed opportunities in terms of corporate investment, a high rate of evictions and foreclosures, fragmented neighborhoods, and high unemployment."

The Growth Ideas

There are no silver bullets or quick fixes in Cleveland's economic future, but the URS team identified three ideas that seem to offer an attractive return on investment. First, the redevelopment and marketing of industrial buildings on the Lake Erie bluffs presents an opportunity to exploit the asset value of the lake. The concurrent beautification of the East Shoreway into a parkway can help to lure suburban businesses downtown and attract out-of-town corporations.

The second strategy involves the greening of Cleveland. We need to build and maintain parkland. "Great cities have great parks," explained team member Catherine Murray, an urban designer. "Cleveland has less parkland than other comparable cities," she said. "That's an important metric for quality of life. There's an ambiance about green spaces and landscaped areas. But they have to be policed and maintained. If we don't police them and allocate resources to take care of them, the park just becomes a green version of a vacant, disused lot."

Murray added that it might make economic sense for the City of Cleveland to transfer or outsource management of its parkland to the Cleveland Metroparks.

The third — and perhaps most promising — growth prospect is the expansion of Cleveland State University. At present, CSU has 15,500 students, with 1,000 housed on campus.

"Growing CSU presents a number of opportunities to help the region," said Bill Mason, a team member who serves as the director of the facilities business line at URS. "Through its growth, CSU can significantly increase foot traffic downtown and catalyze other development."

Mason noted that CSU enrollment pales in comparison to urban schools such as the University of Akron, which has nearly 30,000 students, and the University of Cincinnati, which has an enrollment of 36,415, including 9,000 students on campus. "We believe it's possible for CSU to get to 36,000 enrollment," Mason said. "Eventually we may even see a blended integration model where the CSU and Cuyahoga Community College campuses grow into each other. That's a lot of shared interests. If we could harness that energy, we create a lot of growth opportunities."

The Next Step

While team URS said its ideas should not be considered solutions, Hribar and Miller of Ulmer & Berne agreed the study should serve as a basis for further discussion and, hopefully, action by the major players in the community.

"There is value in just discussing these concepts," Hribar said. "Ultimately, I think that positive change in Cleveland is going to require that citizens, businesses, and civic leaders use all of the resources and all of the assets that the community has in a collaborative way to make this city the best it can be, both from visitation and livability, as well as workability. We need to keep in mind that all of us are stakeholders and that economic vitality benefits everyone here." ♦

For more information about this study, visit urs-cleveland.com.

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