

REVITALIZING A COMMUNITY THROUGH PROPERTY OWNERSHIP

New Road Community Development Group of Exmore
Exmore, VA

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Exmore Town Council Member

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SUMMARY: Ruth Wise and her colleagues have put their formerly disenfranchised neighborhood on the map. Through engaging community residents, buying property and creating sophisticated financial negotiations, they have brought long-sought **sewers** and **home ownership** to residents of New Road. Begun in 1992, the organization embraces the following approaches:

- **Be Ambitious and Stick to It:** New Road's pursuit of a "wild" \$8 million revitalization plan shook up the entire community. When New Road bought large amounts of property from absentee landlords, it "gave them the hiccups," according to Wise. Importantly, the group gained essential leverage.
- **Gain Allies:** Through strategic partnerships with broad-based community development groups and foundations, Wise and her colleagues get both technical support and essential funding.
- **Present a Truly United Front:** New Road's board and leadership represents all walks of New Road life, including youth. They meet regularly, welcome input and make themselves known to public officials. They've built true community ownership that policymakers cannot dismiss.
- **Retain Autonomy:** The organization, for example, turned down a half million dollars that would have restricted its ability to make decisions.

Ruth Wise and her colleagues describe their goals and victories in the following case example:

“A PLACE WORTH SAVING”

New Road Community Development Group of Exmore, Inc.

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It was an incident in the spring of 1995, recalls Ruth Wise, which really drove home the fact that she lived in a community worth saving even though the residents of the community had already started their struggle two years earlier. A wealthy developer on the speculative prowl for real estate swept through the neighborhood. "In effect, she said to us, 'You all don't need to be here'. And I asked her what she'd do with the neighborhood if she were to buy it and she said, 'Oh, I'd burn it down.' We asked her what she would do with [one of the tenants] who lived in one of the houses and was 87 years old. She said to us, 'She's lived like this for 87 years, what difference does it make now?' That's when we dug our heels in. That statement made us realize that we had to keep going to the end, until we got [that tenant] her own water system even if she could use it for a few months or a few years."

And there was plenty to get noisy about. The small African American enclave—called the New Road neighborhood located in the town of Exmore on Virginia's Eastern Shore—had up until that time been widely ignored. Neglected by town officials for decades, the neighborhood of some 300 residents suffered grossly substandard living conditions, including houses with leaky roofs, rotten floors and no insulation. Heat mostly consisted of unsafe kerosene heaters or wood stoves with broken-down chimneys. But most symbolic of the general disdain with which the neighborhood had been treated by the local government power structure was that only a handful of the homes in the neighborhood even had indoor plumbing. And even in those cases, individuals had installed them on their own. In fact, the Health Department claimed that individuals could not have septic systems because the land did not “perc” (the soils would not absorb the effluent). Adding to the powerlessness felt by residents was that over the years many of the homes that had previously been owned by residents had been purchased by two absentee landlords. The result was an overall shabbiness to New Road that had won it a special appellation from other locals: "Scagtown."

The developer's visit was just one milestone in a lengthy and tough journey toward putting New Road on the map, says Wise. The initial fight would be over the basics: indoor plumbing for all residents. But as residents became more involved in that effort, their dreams would grow and larger questions would come. Why, they began to ask, did so few residents own their own homes and how could they change that? For a neighborhood that had so long been marginalized by the local political power and social culture, the challenges involved in dealing with such issues and questions were almost too daunting to contemplate: first, how to convince a community that had never flexed its muscle at all that it really did have the power to pursue its development dreams; and second, how to sustain that dream over what would clearly be a long and rough road.

From Organization to Action

It's not that the residents of New Road hadn't realized their second-class status or evinced some interest in doing something about it. In fact, in 1992 a small core group of neighborhood activists had actually formed the New Road Community Development Group of Exmore, Inc., specifically to address the issue of indoor plumbing. At first people were excited and active. But as time passed and the struggle became tougher and longer, many folks threw up their hands. The

group had a difficult time getting other members of the community to believe that their small neighborhood could actually put up the kind of political fight that it would take to get the town to build a water and sewer system that would include New Road. "I'd seen it happen quite a few times," says a New Road native and former president of the NRCDG. "We'd get to a certain point and then someone would come along and knock us down." One of those blows came early on when initial efforts failed to get Exmore officials to commit to paying a 25 percent loan that would match the 75 percent grant from U.S. Department of Agriculture rural development money for sewer and water. Most residents in Exmore's more well heeled neighborhoods had working wells and septic and did not seem interested in extending the same utilities to New Road.

Contributing to a lacking sense of neighborhood power was a proportional lacking sense of ownership, literally. Three-fourths of the housing in New Road was owned by absentee landlords. "Renters and homeowners have a different attitude," says a representative of the Eastern Shore Economic Empowerment and Housing Corporation, an ally of New Road in their redevelopment efforts. "When you own, all of a sudden it really becomes *your* community." The folks at New Road felt this was their community, as many of the renters were the progeny of the previous homeowners and several generations of the same families had lived there for years. However they felt powerless. Most of those living in the community were low-wage earners in the local agricultural, seafood and poultry industries, unused to exerting influence over anything, and few were educated beyond high school, if that.

But starting in 1992 that all began to change. With sewer and water as their central focus, the NRCDG embarked on a remarkable—and some would say audacious—journey that would pit them against a wide variety of skeptical, determined and sometimes unexpected opponents. At the same time, it would also bind them with new and important—and sometimes unexpected—allies. Most importantly, that journey would result in the community itself awakening to its own value, its own power and its own potential.

Hatching an \$8 million "wild" idea

Even before the dubious offer by the prowling real estate developer, Wise and her NRCDG colleagues had started huddling with several allies including Virginia's Eastern Shore Economic Empowerment and Housing Corporation (VESEHC), a two-county community development corporation dedicated to helping impoverished neighborhoods like New Road redevelop. These corporations were sympathetic to New Road's improvement plans and VESEHC put the group in touch with the McAuley Institute, a Silver Spring, Maryland Catholic philanthropy with a mission of helping low-income communities help themselves.

Working with the housing corporation and the institute, the neighborhood residents came up with an ambitious - Wise calls it "wild" - \$8 million Comprehensive Community Revitalization Plan. The plan had three major components with the new water and sewer system at its core: first, buy out the two landlords and then use those properties to offer home ownership to local residents; second, look at ways to improve economic opportunity and the job prospects of residents; third, build a community center to serve as a focal point for the kind of collective action and neighborhood cohesion that would be required to fulfill the plan's ambitious vision. "We realized that getting indoor plumbing into substandard housing was not the answer alone," says Wise. "We needed real community uplift."

In 1995, the NRCDG closed on the 30 acres and 54 run-down buildings owned by the absentee landlords using a \$350,000 loan from the McAuley Institute. What nobody—particularly the political power structure in Exmore—ever thought possible was actually taking place. A ragtag band of formerly invisible citizens was in the process of shaking up an entire community through everything from basic grassroots organization building to sophisticated financial negotiation and action. "They realized," says Wise when talking about the power structure, "that they were dealing with a new kind of animal."

It was a particularly powerful 'animal,' at that, and it was for one simple reason. Although Wise may often have been the most visible member of the NRCDG and the community, she had a powerful group of very involved activists working along side and right behind her. "It wasn't like Ruth was doing all the talking and suggesting," says an NRCDG board member. "She listened to what the community wanted. She wasn't going for less; whatever we said, and how we wanted things, she was going to do her best to get it." Wise is the first to say that any perceived power she might have is derived from the power of the neighborhood. "Our board is made up of community people," says Wise. And some very dedicated people, at that. "In whatever capacity that I can do something, I'll do it. I don't care what it is, I'll do it. If it helps New Road, I'll do it. And that's all," says an NRCDG activist.

A new force in town

It was that sort of broad support and individual dedication that was key to New Road's new visibility and clout. It would not be enough for a handful of activists to foment change. New Road had to present a broad, united, sustained and visible front to the powers that were in order to be taken seriously. Its 15-member board included citizens from all walks of New Road life, including two youngsters. Decisions were all board-driven, in close consultation with the community. "You see way too much top-down planning," says a member of VESEEHC. "New Road truly came at this as a community."

To sustain such community involvement, the NRCDG would hold regular informal and formal meetings at least weekly and sometimes more frequently. "Talk about meeting," says Wise. "We met two and three nights a week and all over the county. And everyone's input was welcome. Someone would say, 'Why don't we try this or why don't we try that?' Anybody's idea was as good as anybody else's."

At the same time, New Road residents started making their faces and voices known to local and regional public officials. Whereas they had not been present at Exmore town meetings or county affairs in the past, for example, they became regular participants in the action. Even if there was no business before the town or council at a particular meeting, residents of New Road would often show up anyway, just to reinforce the message that there was a new constituency in town and that it was paying attention.

New clout, hard won

With the McAuley loan in hand, New Road moved forward on redeveloping real estate and pushing its broader economic development initiatives. It began selling lots to first-time homeowners, which helped it begin repaying the Institute's loan. It started to work on securing

more than \$1 million in federal and state funding to build new rental units for low-income elderly and disabled residents. The group hired an economic development assistant to push its economic development agenda, which included renting a local storefront in which to set up a computer-learning center. The group also secured several Vista volunteers over time to help do community outreach.

But there were some things that New Road did not do that got some people's attention, as well. At one point they rejected a half a million dollars in state money because it was going to be low-income tax credit money, which would have required giving up their autonomy and power, as they would become secondary partners to investors. "We told them, 'Take it back.' And they said, 'You have the nerve to turn down a half a million dollars?' And we told them, "This is our property and you're not going to force us to give up our ability to make decisions about our own property."

At the same time the group battled for using federal development money for more than just minimal fix-ups. The federal government, however, had strict rules about how the money could be spent, and it was restricted by rules to minimal, virtually cosmetic fix-ups. "We told them, 'We don't want little 6'-x-6' bathrooms or other cosmetic fix-ups. We want real additions with room for washers and dryers.'" An Exmore Town Council member wasn't surprised by the neighborhood's tough negotiating stance on using the federal money. "This community knew what it wanted. And it wouldn't settle for 'you can't have it like that, you have to do it this way.' They didn't want minimal cookie cutter improvements."

County planning officials, says Wise, would "bang on the table" and complain that New Road "wanted things different than everybody else." So Wise said New Road did what was becoming natural to them. "We banged the table right back," Wise says. The regional planning district commission was used to running things. They were used to dealing with a few landlords rather than with an entire community, landlords who didn't particularly care much about the condition of their properties or the quality of life of the residents. That changed dramatically when New Road bought up the buildings and land. "We just kept on fighting for it and saying, 'No, give folks a chance to have a better quality of life. And we are not just talking about houses here. We are talking about a better quality of life.' And we just had to keep hammering that notion home."

It was a concept that took some government officials awhile to absorb. "The planning district kept calling us a 'project area,'" says Wise, "and we would say, 'We're not a project, we're a community!'" And as a community, New Road wasn't going to settle for the sort of second-class treatment that officials had gotten used to handing it. Residents wanted laundry rooms, large bathrooms and porches, all of which challenged bureaucratic assumptions and norms about what "poor people" should want or have. In buying up all the property it did, New Road had new leverage to make such demands. "We gave them the hiccups when we bought all that property," says Wise.

But not all local officials were lining up against New Road. In fact, a key change on the Town Council was critical to Exmore's finally voting in 1995 to accept the Virginia Community Development Block Grant funds (CDBG funds) for the sewer and water project. Even after the state announced they would give the grant to the town on behalf of New Road, there was a great deal of debate on the Town Council as to whether or not they should accept the grant. The sitting mayor at the time resigned on the eleventh hour before the vote took place. He knew that he was

going to have to break a tie between the six council members. The vice-mayor, who later became the mayor, broke the tie in favor of accepting the grant for the sewer system for the New Road Community. "What impressed me about the New Road folks is that they never gave up," says one of the newer members of the Exmore Town Council who sided with the sewer and water project. "It was obvious they were in this for the long haul."

The backhoes finally arrive

For all the progress and promises, it wasn't until May 1998 that construction of the sewer and water system finally began, but it was a day that no one on New Road will ever forget. "We were like little kids when that construction equipment arrived," says Wise. "There were tractors and trucks everywhere. We were hooting and hollering and yelling, 'Here comes another one! Here comes another one!'"

Despite the battles and the bitterness that swirled around New Road through the middle 1990s, in a larger sense both New Road and Exmore have grown together thanks to the hard work of the NRCDG and New Road's now enfranchised residents. "We had the stomach for the fight," says Wise, but now New Road has the heart to embrace broader change and work with the whole community on more comprehensive improvements throughout town.

"We know that we helped put Exmore on the map," says Wise. "And they're now in the process of getting their own grants for downtown revitalization and we're all for that because we're part of this town."

It's an interesting final twist on the story that a disenfranchised group of citizens from the other side of the tracks was the catalyst to what is now broad change and improvement in Exmore. One of Exmore's Town Council members maintains, "It's because they had the vision. They were looking forward. Their work has not only made their neighborhood a better place, but it has made our town a better place. We're very proud of the work that they did and we're proud of the work that's still being done."

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