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East Liberty becomes a vibrant community

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By Diana Nelson Jones, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Ten years ago, East Liberty had a ray of hope: A Home Depot was under construction. Then-Mayor Tom Murphy called the new store "a launching pad" for the East End's neighborhoods.

He picked the right metaphor; East Liberty is on a rocket's trajectory. But it's a long flight. "We're at year 10 of the story," said Mark Minnerly, director of real estate for the Mosites Co., the developer of Eastside. "We're halfway done."

East Liberty has gone from being a neighborhood in need of someone to invest private money to being a beehive. Sixteen developers are at work there currently. Two new hotels are coming, the first hotels in decades. The Eastside complex that includes Whole Foods is expanding. Hundreds of new homes are being built, and a green-infrastructure plan will bring geothermal heating and cooling to about 800 of them. Storm water sequestration plans are in the works, as is a European-style town square.

On Thursday, over fruit and pastries at the Kelly-Strayhorn Theater -- itself 10 years old -- a clutch of community development pros celebrated the neighborhood's journey and marveled at what it took.

It took, first, a community plan built by broad consensus.

Rob Stephany, executive director of the Urban Redevelopment Authority, who then worked for East Liberty Development Inc., recalls ELDI inviting as many neighborhood representatives as possible to help plan, including residents of public housing.

"I remember," said Maelene Myers, executive director of ELDI, "that the community planning just seemed so overwhelming when it started. I thought, 'How were we going to get funding?'"

By the mid-1990s, East Liberty's future and demeanor was grim. Its street life was vice-ridden and forbidding, its core blighted.

"Everyone agreed the high-rises were poorly managed and that dysfunction was an imposing influence on the neighborhood," said Mr. Stephany.

ELDI committed to building affordable replacement housing when it proposed to destroy the high-rises. It has replaced roughly 400 of the 600 units with scattered townhouses and apartments, said Skip Schwab, ELDI's director of grants and development. It has also built and restored hundreds of market-rate homes.

The planning process was spirited and noisy, but "we had an inspired shared vision," said Mr. Stephany. "When Whole Foods approached us, we handed them our plan. They came to the next meeting and we began connecting people to their jobs."

By the time Whole Foods opened in 2002, ELDI, with representatives from a dozen public and private organizations, established the East End Growth Fund.

Ellen Kight, then with the state Department of Community and Economic