



A Decade of Change

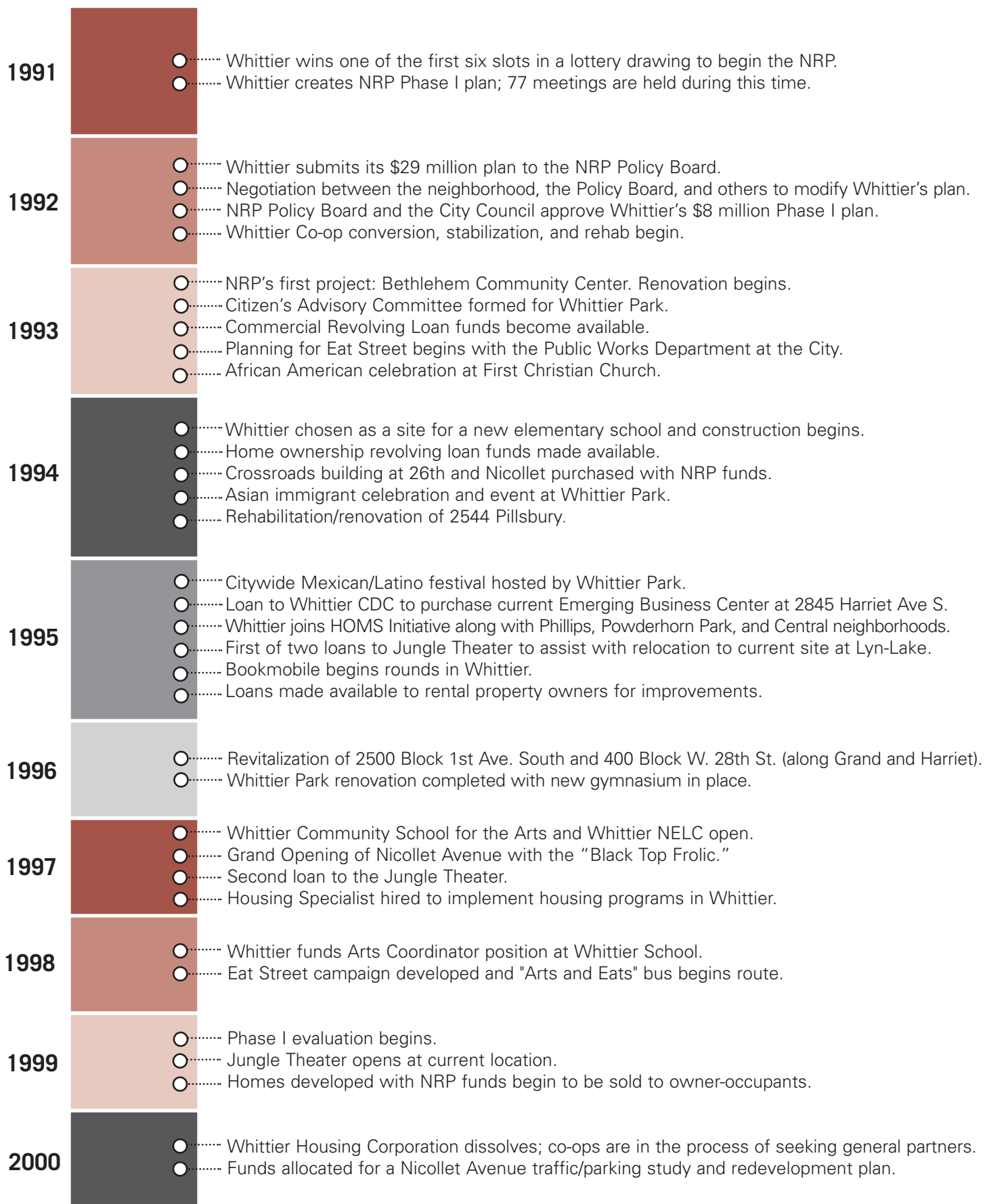
The Minneapolis Neighborhood Revitalization Program
&
The Whittier Neighborhood

1991 - 2000

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Whittier Alliance and the Neighborhood Revitalization Program: A Chronology



NRP and the Whittier neighborhood

The Neighborhood Revitalization Program, or NRP, was envisioned and designed in the late 1980s as a tool to support the revitalization of Minneapolis neighborhoods. A one-of-a-kind program with both national and international recognition, NRP directs tax money directly into neighborhoods, allowing neighborhood stakeholders such as residents and business and property owners to make spending decisions that reflect the needs and desires of the community from the ground up.

In 1991, Whittier received one of the first six lottery slots available to neighborhoods throughout Minneapolis and embarked on the 10-year journey of Phase I in NRP. Between April of 1991 and January of 1992, the Whittier neighborhood held 77 meetings to create the Neighborhood Plan, which outlined projects and spending priorities for NRP dollars allocated to Whittier. On July 24, 1992, the Minneapolis City Council approved Whittier's Neighborhood Plan and implementation began in three primary areas: building community, housing a neighborhood, and revitalizing the business economy.

This booklet is a review and evaluation of NRP Phase I in the Whittier neighborhood (1991-2001). Whittier's Phase I NRP journey has not been easy. Some of the difficulties were to be expected. As the first neighborhood in a program brand-new to the City of Minneapolis, Whittier broke ground with many public partners, including the City of Minneapolis, Hennepin County, the

Minneapolis Public Schools, the Minneapolis Park Board, and Minneapolis Public Libraries. Not the least of the difficulties was that Whittier's plan requested \$29 million from NRP – but the neighborhood was given \$8 million. Needless to say, some of what was originally envisioned changed form, and some ideas disappeared altogether. Internally, Whittier struggled to reconcile different visions for a healthy urban neighborhood. Neighborhood volunteers, however, worked hard to implement their vision, sometimes even when it looked like the next step wasn't possible, and ultimately, Whittier and its public partners accomplished great work on a neighborhood scale.

Walking or driving through the vital, lively neighborhood that Whittier is today shows some of the growth and development that has occurred in the last few years. There is new construction and renovation. People are vying to move into the community. The neighborhood has the community school it so desperately wanted in 1991 as well as a beautiful, safe park that attracts a broad cross-section of people who live, work, or visit Whittier. A revitalized Nicollet Avenue – EAT STREET – provides commercial amenities that support the quality of urban life. These changes and others are highlighted in this report to the Whittier neighborhood. For a more in-depth look at the past ten years of NRP, ask the Whittier Alliance for the full report: *The Neighborhood Revitalization Program: A Case Study of a Neighborhood*.



View of downtown Minneapolis from Washburn Fair Oaks Park in Whittier.

Community center tops wish list

In 1991, hundreds of people living and working in the neighborhood told the Whittier Alliance that what they wanted most was a new community center. The community center – people called it the heart of the neighborhood – would be the focus of community life, the place where people's needs for social services, recreation, education, and participation would be met. It would contain a K–8 public elementary school, a community and education program for adults, space and publicity for many volunteer interest groups to form and meet, offices for the neighborhood organization and a daycare/nightcare center. There would be a well-planned playground outside and an indoor playspace for the winter. Youth recreation programs would emphasize sports, hobbies, and academic pursuits. It would be the one-stop shop for social services: for example, public assistance recipients could meet with their workers and private social service agencies could maintain branch offices. By 2000, many of those dreams had come true. Stakeholders' highest priority – the community center with a park, school, and early learning center – had become a reality. On the other hand, some ideas disappeared when Whittier received less money than expected. Here are the projects that survived:

- **Bethlehem Stewart Community Center** (\$250,000)
- **Whittier Park/Community Center** (\$1.9 million)
- **Whittier Community School for the Arts** (\$400,000 plus NRP leverage to build the \$15 million school)
- **Arts Curriculum Coordinator for the Whittier School** (\$80,000*)
- **Neighborhood Early Learning Center (NELC)** (\$38,500*)
- **Bookmobile** (\$120,000)
- **Community cultural celebrations** (African, Asian, and Latino)

* In addition to NRP funds, the Whittier neighborhood also received \$143,000 from Hennepin County to support social services within the neighborhood. Dollar amounts marked with an asterisk came from these funds.



In 1991, Whittier residents said their first priority was to get an elementary school in their neighborhood. Whittier Community School of the Arts opened in 1997.

Whittier's park, school and NELC complex

In 1992, gambling, swearing, and smoking were common in Whittier Park, and drug dealing was going on, some right out of the park building. Police surveillance had identified as many as 60 people who were conducting illegal activities on the park grounds. Because of the problems, residents living near the park said that before they would agree to any park improvement, the Park Board had to turn the situation around. One step the Park Board took was to hire a Corky Weisman to be the new director for Whittier Park. Weisman's life was literally threatened, but he and his new staff stood fast. Rules were posted in the park, and violators knew the consequences of their actions. By 1993, the Park Board could demonstrate that the park was back on track and programming was going well. Community members and Park and Recreation planners sat down to talk, and renovation of the park building began later that year with NRP dollars.

Whittier Park's new gym was also constructed with NRP funds. As important as the gym was for the park, it became an even more important tool to bring a new elementary school to the site. Because community members believed a school would eventually sit at this location, volunteers worked hard and long to place the gym on the south side of the building rather than the west, resulting in a site that the Minneapolis Public Schools chose for a new elementary school.



In 1991, Whittier Park was a very unsafe place. In 2001, a beautiful, safe park attracts people of all ages. Children and families enjoy the wading pool and tot lot, teens "shoot hoops" and participate in arts and athletic programs, and adults attend meetings at the park building or just come to stroll and greet their neighbors.

Many residents rate the Whittier Community School for the Arts as the neighborhood's biggest achievement in the last ten years. Because of the community's work with the park, there was already a gym being built on the site with non-school money – a significant factor in the School Board's decision to locate a school in Whittier. In addition to their success in pressuring the School Board to look at the site, Whittier helped to create a unique arts focus for the school and funded the position of Arts Coordinator. The school opened in September 1997. It currently serves 485 students, and provides ELL programs for Spanish and Somali speaking students. Arts partners include: Intermedia Arts, the Jungle Theater, Children's Theatre Company, Minneapolis Institute of Arts, MacPhail School of Music, and others.

The Whittier Neighborhood Early Learning Center, or NELC, is located within the school building and houses direct service providers to meet the needs of Whittier families. Since the NELC's opening, service providers have included the Children's Home Society, Father's Project, Circle of Women, and a dental clinic run by Children's Dental Services.

The strength of this project was its ability to use NRP to leverage funds – to gather funds from other sources, including the Park Board and the Public Schools – to create what the neighborhood envisioned. At the citywide celebration of NRP Phase I, this project was awarded the "Best Multi-Jurisdictional Project Award."



Whittier parents wanted a school readiness program for their young children to be included in their Neighborhood Action Plan. Although no NRP dollars went into the Neighborhood Early Learning Center (NELC) located in the Whittier complex, the neighborhood leveraged its NRP resources and the Youth Coordinating Board (YCB) raised the money for them. Then, a neighborhood advisory board decided what services would go into the space.

Improved housing stock enhances Whittier neighborhood's quality of life

It is important to recognize and applaud the tremendous efforts that Whittier neighborhood stakeholders made to improve the housing in their community. From the very beginning of the community's NRP process, residents and other neighborhood stakeholders recognized the important relationship between improving housing opportunities and enhancing the community's quality of life. In NRP Phase I, the Whittier neighborhood spent \$4.5 million, or 58% of the neighborhood's overall NRP allocation to rental and homeownership housing initiatives.

All one has to do is to walk along the 2500 block of First Avenue and compare it to photographs of just a few years ago to see the difference. Or look at the new homes on Harriet and Grand. Home ownership in Whittier is up from 10% to 15%. And although some of the co-ops continue to need renovation, one sees most apartment buildings with no vacancy signs. Property values have increased, and homes – both single and multi-family dwellings – are selling more quickly and at higher prices than ever before.



Rental and home ownership strategies used to invest Whittier's housing dollars during the past ten years include:

- **Conversion of E-Flats into a leasehold co-operative** (\$642,000)
- **Stabilization of co-ops** (\$1.4 million)
- **Whittier Housing Corporation** (\$50,000)
- **Rental Rehabilitation and Renewal Loan Program** (3R Loan) (\$800,000)
- **Rehabilitation Incentive Fund** (Consultant and project at 2544 Pillsbury) (\$70,000)
- **HOMS Initiative** (\$60,000) & Home Ownership development (\$30,000) Development of 12 sites in Whittier, including the 2500 Block 1st Avenue South and 400 Block W. 28th Street.
- **Home Ownership Loan Programs** (\$886,600) 13 home improvement loans administered by Southside Neighborhood Housing Services, 17 home improvement loans administered by the Center for Energy Environment.



Whittier helps first-time home buyers

Scott Schwahn and Jessica Ruona and their three children, Zachery, Freddie and Zohra, had been living in an apartment in Whittier for several years. Then, in 2000, a Whittier home owner's program made it possible for them to buy a home of their own in the neighborhood. Jessica says, "After we went through a course that taught us about home ownership, we were able to put in bids on houses developed with NRP support. This was huge for our family. It made it possible for us to stay in a community we had learned to love."



Because the Whittier community recognized the important relationship between improving housing opportunities and enhancing the community's quality of life, housing initiatives have been an important part of their NRP plan from the very beginning. The Whittier Alliance exceeded the 52% NRP housing requirement, dedicating \$4.5 million or 58% of its overall \$8 million NRP allocation to housing initiatives in their NRP Phase I plan.

First Avenue Renaissance

A stretch of First Avenue South between 25th and 26th streets was long regarded as one of the most blighted and difficult areas in the Whittier Neighborhood. Several substandard or condemned homes on 20-foot and 30-foot lots were acquired with NRP Comp Block funds and families who had been renting the substandard homes were given funds enabling them to purchase homes elsewhere. The substandard properties were demolished, the lots combined or reconfigured and two historic homes and one historic duplex were moved to the site and restored. Lowry Hill East Neighborhood, the Wedge Co-op and First Christian Church donated historic homes that were saved from demolition and moved, which contributed to the Whittier Alliance being recognized for the Minneapolis Heritage Preservation Commission NRP 2000 Preservation Award.

Housing co-ops keep rents affordable

One of the first strategies undertaken by the Alliance was the stabilization of several multi-family housing co-operatives in the neighborhood. The buildings, which were in poor condition and associated with high crime activity, had been purchased by the Alliance in the 1980s and converted into leasehold co-ops. In the early 1990s, NRP dollars were used to finish the process of conversion and financial stabilization for several co-ops, in hopes that they would provide revenue for the Alliance, provide stable and affordable housing for families and individuals in the neighborhood, and raise the quality of life for the neighborhood. The Whittier Housing Corporation was formed in 1994 to manage the co-ops, but, due to financial issues that could not be overcome, the Housing Corporation dissolved in 2000. The buildings are now managed separately under various partners. Unfortunately, initial hopes for the co-ops were not fully realized, as difficulties with finances and maintenance continue. On the other hand, the money spent on these buildings has lengthened their life as housing resources for families in Whittier.



Leveraging their resources by combining HOMES, NRP, CDBG and RIF resources, the Whittier neighborhood has made tremendous strides in improving its housing stock. All one has to do is to walk along the 2500 block of First Avenue and compare it to photographs of just a few years ago to see the difference.

Whittier businesses are thriving

Business is much more active in the Whittier neighborhood today than it was ten years ago. Nicollet Avenue is an attractive and very busy commercial corridor known as Eat Street throughout the Twin Cities. LynLake is becoming an entertainment mecca, and redevelopment is occurring at Franklin/Nicollet. And although at a slower pace, South Whittier is also beginning to recreate itself. The Emerging Business Center is thriving, and a new Somali mall on Pillsbury Avenue is adding more international flavor – as well as more commercial traffic – to the area.

This is a far different scene than the empty storefronts and crime-ridden streets of just a few years ago. Was the Neighborhood Revitalization Program responsible for the rebirth of the economy of the neighborhood? No, certainly not by itself. Do neighborhood stakeholders feel that NRP played a role in the revitalization? Yes. Although there isn't agreement about how much, people generally say that NRP played a role. Other organizations that played roles include the Whittier Community Development Corporation (CDC), which had been in operation for eight years by the time NRP was introduced, the Whittier Business Association, and two other economic development groups (focusing on Franklin/Nicollet and South Whittier).

The Whittier business community and the CDC worked together on the following strategies to revitalize the neighborhood's business economy:

- **Commercial and Industrial Revolving Loan Fund** (\$500,000) *South Whittier: Whittier CDC Emerging Business Center; 26th Street Commercial Area: the Crossroads building, Nicollet Avenue parking and redevelopment plan, and the Jungle Theater*
- **2% Revolving Loan Fund** (\$274,000)* *21 commercial loans in Whittier*
- **EAT STREET** (\$40,000)

* These funds actually came from CDBG Block grant funds. The neighborhood used NRP to leverage them for the 2% Fund.



Business is much more active in the Whittier neighborhood today than it was 10 years ago, and Nicollet Avenue is an attractive and very busy commercial corridor known as EAT STREET throughout the Twin Cities.

EAT STREET spurs economic vitality

Eat Street was one of the neighborhood's most successful and visible NRP projects. Despite only \$40,000 in funding, Whittier's ingenuity resulted in amazing strides towards bringing back the neighborhood's economic vitality. Ethnic restaurants and shops began to fill in the empty spaces. The new streetscape added trees, iron and brick railings, and ornamental lighting. In 1998, the "Arts and Eats" bus began bringing visitors from downtown and the Convention Center to Nicollet to eat and shop. In August 1999, *Mpls. St. Paul Magazine* highlighted Eat Street, describing it as "a worldly ethnic feast of the senses." NRP recognized the significance of Eat Street with the citywide "Best Economic Development" award in Phase I.

Crossing all lines, City/neighborhood, City/State, business/resident and three neighborhoods, Nicollet Avenue has become one of Minneapolis' most dynamic commercial corridors. The "Black Top Frolic" in August 1997 celebrated the improvements promoting safety, livability, and confidence in the health of Whittier, and in 2000, Whittier allocated remaining NRP funds for a traffic and parking study and the creation of a Nicollet Avenue redevelopment plan.



Jungle Theater moves to Whittier

In 1995, the Jungle Theater was looking for financial assistance to complete a move into its current location at 2951 Lyndale Avenue South. The Whittier Alliance responded with a \$150,000 loan and a \$50,000 grant from the Commercial and Industrial Revolving Loan Fund. The loan was repaid within one year. This made it possible for the Jungle to relocate successfully and add to the artistic atmosphere of the neighborhood.



Commercial & Industrial Revolving Loan Fund

Two significant projects that came out of this fund include the Jungle Theater (see side story) and the Whittier CDC's Emerging Business Center. In 1995, Whittier loaned \$150,000 to the Whittier CDC to purchase a building in South Whittier as an Emerging Business Center. This business incubator has assisted entrepreneurs to start up businesses and contributed to the economic development of this corner of the neighborhood. Although these two projects were successful, NRP I also contained challenges, among them the Crossroads building at 26th and Nicollet.

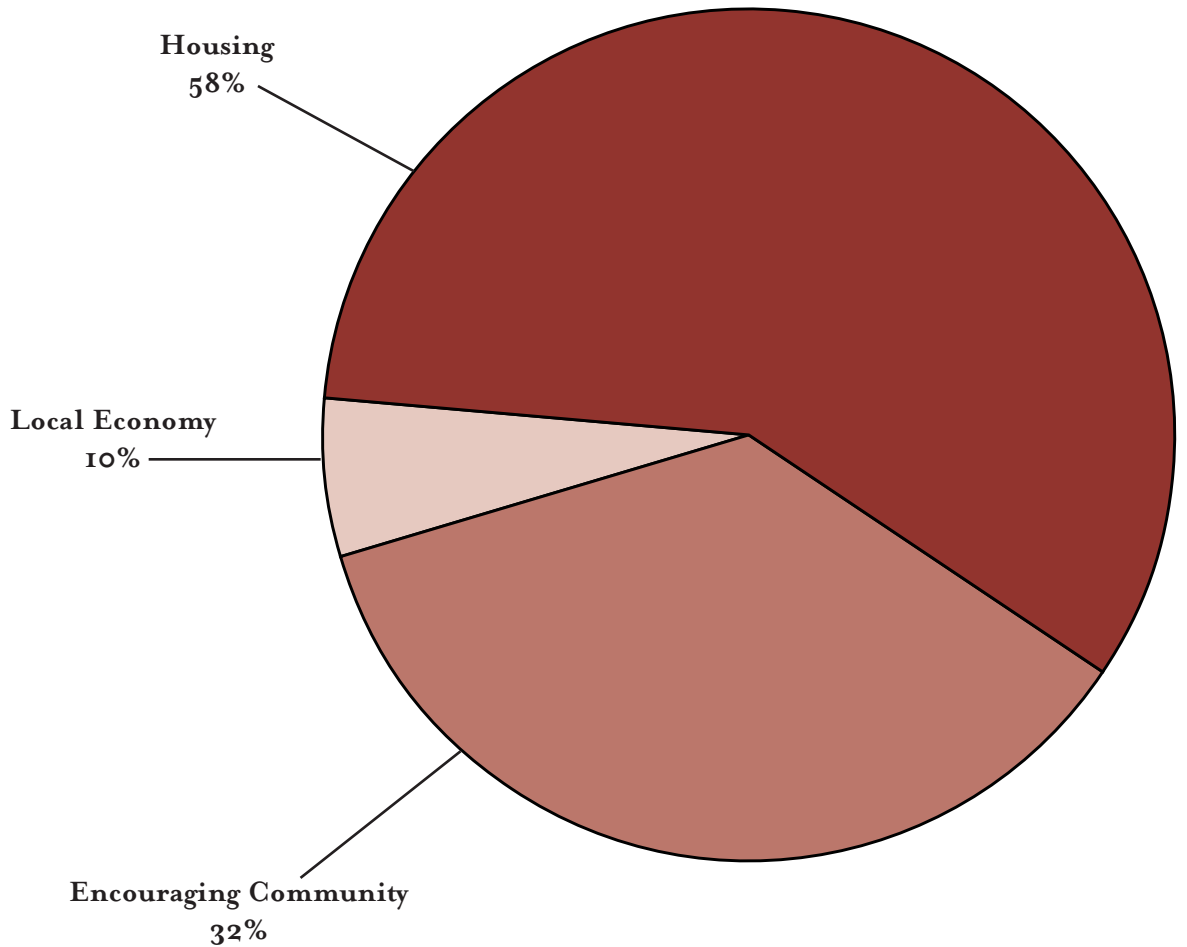
The Crossroads building was purchased by the neighborhood in 1994, and Whittier began to work with a developer to raise development funds, expecting that the \$150,000 in NRP dollars would leverage up to \$1.5 million, at a ratio of \$10 of "other funds" for every \$1 of NRP funds. This was how City policy makers designed NRP, and early neighborhoods, including Whittier, wrote their plans based on these expectations. Unfortunately, much of the funds from "other sources" never arrived, and funding for the Crossroads project never came through. After two years, the bank repossessed the property. Fortunately, both the City and the neighborhood learned a significant amount in Phase I, and similar situations are not anticipated in Phase II.



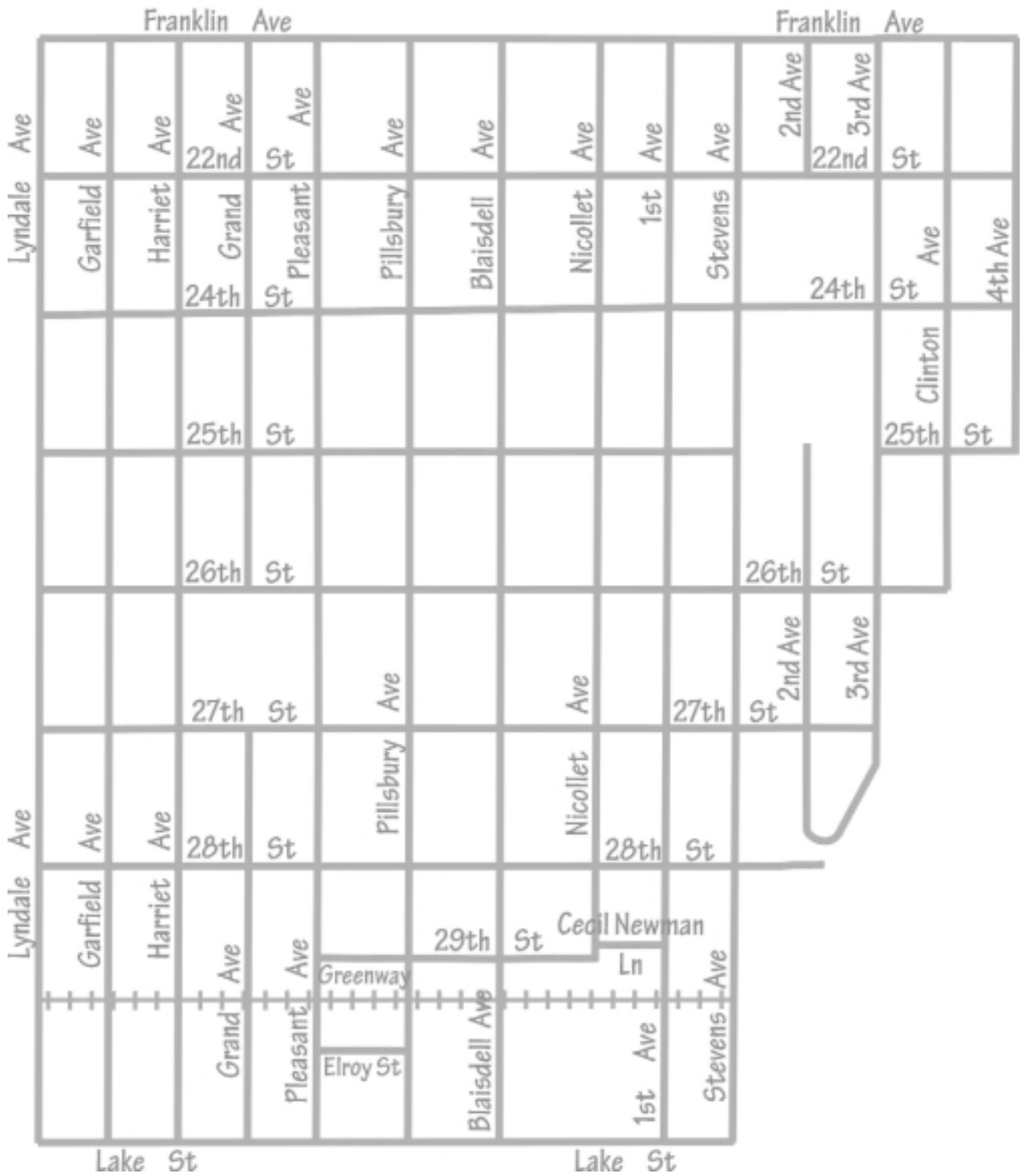
Some of the business establishments have been around for many, many years. Others have opened only recently. Together, the diversity of eating and shopping opportunities bring thousands of people to Whittier every week. Taco Morelos and The Black Forest Inn are just two of the many restaurants serving ethnic food. See the Eat Street Directory, available at the Whittier Alliance and other locations, for a complete listing of Eat Street establishments.

Housing received largest Whittier investment

Overall, Whittier spent nearly \$8 million in NRP Phase I dollars. Because of the difficulties described earlier for both the Alliance and the City, it is almost impossible to give an exact accounting of where each dollar went. What we do know, however, is that 58% of all NRP Phase I dollars was spent on housing and housing-related issues, an amount above and beyond the requirements of the NRP. Another \$814,000, or 10%, was spent on commercial issues. The final 32% was spent on encouraging community. Difficulties notwithstanding, it is safe to say that NRP dollars have contributed significantly to the life and health of the Whittier community over the past ten years.



The Whittier Neighborhood





WHITTIER

THE INTERNATIONAL NEIGHBORHOOD

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