

inventing the future

Palm Readings

Cleveland neighborhood development organizations have discovered an efficient way to map their communities' needs and opportunities – Palm Pilots.

BY ANTON ZUIKER

The other day, though I'd forgotten to bring along my plastic fold-up road map of Cleveland and neglected to download MapQuest directions to my Handspring Visor, I managed to find my way from the West Side through driving rain to the offices of the Buckeye Area Development Corporation. Inside, a group of community development workers and neighborhood volunteers waited to tell me about a new program that's helping Cleveland communities map their challenges and assets.

Knowing where problem properties are concentrated, where growth is happening, where various community assets such as schools and churches and commercial centers are located – especially where there are opportunities to grow or to upgrade the housing stock – is essential to the work of community development corporations (CDCs). So the discovery of a new tool for collecting and organizing such information more efficiently and effectively is being seen as an exciting development.

For the last year, Cleveland's CDCs have been able to borrow Palm

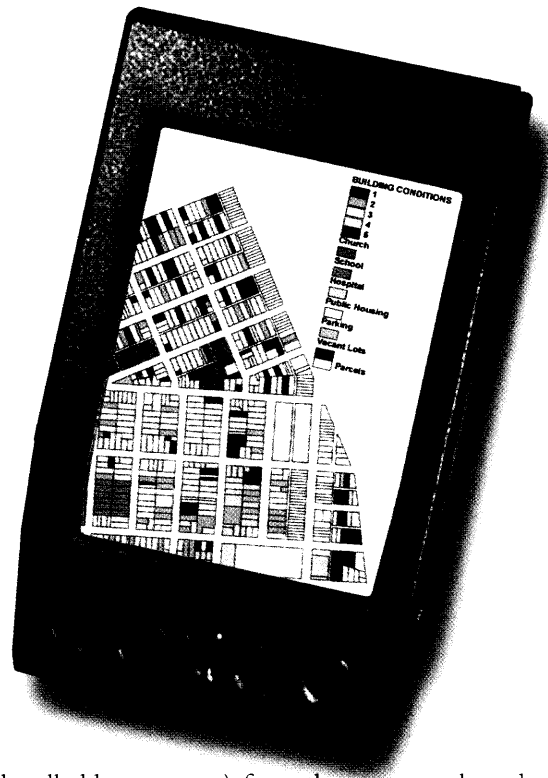
Pilots (handheld computers) from the Cleveland Housing Network, which purchased them with a Department of Commerce grant. These nifty gadgets, loaded with a database program designed to collect information about the quality of the homes in a community, allow volunteers to quickly survey a neighborhood. The CDCs then convert this information into color-coded maps.

The Palm Pilot program was developed and funded by the Enterprise Foundation, a national community-building organization with a Cleveland office. Enterprise initially designed the Building Condition/Land Use Survey (which uses Pendragon Forms software with the Palm operating system) to give community developers in York, Pennsylvania, a quick and easy tool for rating the conditions of homes, their yards and the lots they sit on. Leslie Strnicha, now acting director of the Cleveland office, brought the Palm program to northeast Ohio last

year when she was working with the Direct Action for Central Lorain Steering Committee on its Central Lorain Community Plan. Over the last few months, she's trained staff and volunteers in three Cleveland communities.

Many of the individuals who volunteered for this training had little, if any, hands-on experience with computers. Strnicha first taught them to use Palm's hieroglyphic-like writing system. Then they learned to view the record for each residential lot and accurately and quickly enter any missing information: lot number, type of house, number of stories, condition of the structure and presence of a detached garage, garden shed or other accessories. It takes about a minute to survey a house from the sidewalk and enter all the relevant information, says Strnicha. Rating the condition of the home is done on a scale of 1-5, with homes in excellent condition earning a 1 rating.

Community developers regularly



walk and drive their neighborhoods to keep abreast of the state of their community. Bobbi Reichtell, a development officer with Slavic Village Development Corporation (SVDC), has done this for more than twenty years. In the old days, she says, she had to go down to the county offices to get tax maps, then cut each map into sections so individuals could fan throughout the community doing “windshield surveys” – the maps spread precariously on dashboards. “When I think of the hours we wasted.”

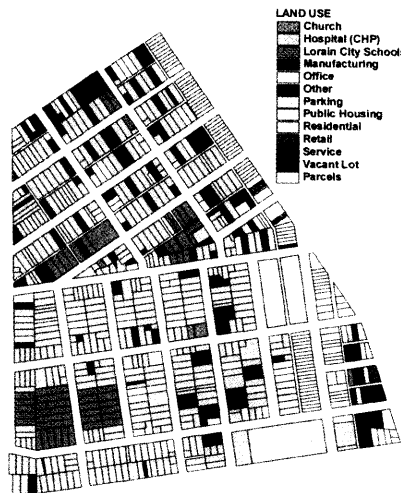
Slavic Village targeted the St. Hyacinth neighborhood (around East 65th and Francis streets), says Reichtell, because it is a community in transition. Seven years ago, the St. Hyacinth parish school closed, and some families moved out. But the neighborhood’s positive features – great access to highways, a nearby rapid transit stop, and vacant warehouses – offered possibilities. “We saw this neighborhood as needing an infusion of development,” she says. Reichtell found funding to convert two buildings into loft apartment units, but her funders wanted a neighborhood plan complete with maps.

With Palm Pilots preloaded with the county information and just two canvassers, SVDC mapped the 950-house St. Hyacinth neighborhood in just thirty-six hours – a little more than two minutes per house. Those data will be used to generate the maps that may very well attract further funding for the neighborhood. This is just the efficient, effective outcome that Enterprise Foundation wanted to cultivate among neighborhood development organizations.

George Epler, Sr., was one of SVDC’s mappers. A Slavic Village resident and block club president, Epler was surprised by what he discovered during his survey. “I

learned that there were empty lots where the county thought there were homes standing,” he says. A new map of the neighborhood will point developers to where in-fill housing can go.

Another of the organizations that embraced the Palm program was Buckeye Area Development Corporation. When Community organizer Benie Pinkney called for volunteers, seventy-three-year-old Reitha Hemphill was one of those who answered. She’d seen a businessman using a handheld computer on a plane last year, and thought this would be her chance to



learn a new skill. “It’s a new day,” says Hemphill, who moved to Buckeye in 1969. “It’s like playing a game.”

Carol Davidson, another Buckeye volunteer, who has lived in the neighborhood for fourteen years, “hadn’t realized the quality and diversity of these houses.” Having to walk the streets and look at each structure helped her see the neighborhood in a different light. “There are a lot of quality houses here. They’re not all run down.” She hopes the information she collected will inform the city about Buckeye’s needs.

What Buckeye needs, says Pinkney, is commercial and retail development, which will prompt more investment in the housing stock. Strnicha will soon unveil a new program for the Palms designed to survey commercial space.

The City of Cleveland, meanwhile, is knee-deep in a many-years-long, \$26-million effort to create a detailed digital map of the city. This map, a comprehensive conversion of traditional paper maps to computer-based geographic information systems, will include information used by at least twelve city departments – from Health to Community Development to Public Utilities. Those departments, say City officials, are excited about the prospect of an integrated map of Cleveland. No longer will they have to rummage through cabinet drawers looking for a dusty, crumpled map showing the locations of water pipes laid down a hundred years ago.

When Cleveland’s digital map is complete in about a year and half, City department managers will be able to share information between departments. The map will indicate, for example, where the utilities department knows of a vacant lot; various offices can then plan economic or community development uses for that lot.

Citizens will have access to this information as well. A developer, for instance, might use the map to determine the location of utility lines. City officials hope that public access to this GIS information will cut down on costly construction accidents and facilitate commercial investment.

You might say Clevelanders now hold the city’s future in the palm of their hand.

Former editor Anton Zuiker covers the frontiers of technology and change for Northern Ohio Live.