

## Solving Senior Housing Shortages with Vacant Commercial Spaces in Middle Neighborhoods

Rochester, NY and Detroit, MI

Vacant commercial spaces can have a profoundly negative influence on communities. They represent disinvestment and can bring down property values, plus be a magnet for vandalism or unfavorable activity. Repurposing these spaces can be a challenge based on the size of the building and scope of the project but may be worth exploring.

Below are two examples of repurposing vacant commercial property, one in Upstate New York and the other in Detroit, Michigan. Though they share similarities, each is unique with interesting challenges and solutions. Two things these projects have in common are the need to support senior housing development and the importance of incorporating community engagement in the process.

### PathStone – Rochester, New York

Neighborhoods in the City of Irondequoit, NY – a first ring suburb of the City of Rochester – have naturally occurring affordable housing with older housing stock built mainly in the 1950s and 60s. These older homes can be difficult to maintain and are often subject to deferred maintenance issues, which has played into the neighborhood's need for senior housing. A solution to this need came by solving another problem in Irondequoit – a vacant shopping mall.

Before the project began, the Irondequoit Mall sat vacant for 14 years. Repurposing the entire mall for housing was not feasible so PathStone made a deal with the owner to purchase just one store – Sears – for adaptive reuse. In addition, PathStone built new construction alongside that section of the mall, in the parking lot, and the two buildings are adjoined by a skywalk. PathStone owns both buildings and has a 99-year ground lease for the land beneath them. The rest of the mall space is targeted for economic development. By working together, PathStone and the owner can maximize the space to solve multiple community issues.



The project, named Skyview Park Apartments, has 157 senior housing units: 73 in the Sears building and 84 in the new building alongside it. PathStone partnered with the local hospital to deem 78 of the units for frail elderly, with the rest set aside for independent living. Also, the hospital moved their nursing program to one of the available commercial spaces inside the mall. PathStone created three interior courtyards and one community center for residents, plus seniors can take advantage of the indoor walking space throughout the mall, all year round. Economic development throughout the rest of the mall will take time but

incorporating the housing component increases demand for all types of businesses including medical offices, restaurants, shopping, and so on. The concept of repurposing vacant commercial spaces is not new but comes with specific challenges that need innovative solutions.

**Tips for Success**

Determine the Needs of the Community	Senior housing can be a great repurpose for malls but depends on the needs of the community. Begin with a market study to determine need and scope, and whether or not the buildings are appropriate for adaptive reuse or need to be demolished. Include a cost analysis to figure out what works best and gather partners who can collaborate and also benefit from the project.
Consider Parking Lots	One consideration for repurposing a mall is the parking lot, which can be a challenge to manage and maintain. Using that space for new construction can help but may not always be an option. Consider the responsibilities and options available for the parking lot as part of the overall analysis.
Think Outside the Box	When repurposing commercial space, consider site control and acquisition but be creative and willing to try different things as well. These types of projects are not “business as usual.” Be sure to accommodate legal protections but be open to new ideas – that’s the only way innovative projects work.
Work with the Owner	If repurposing a mall, call the owner to find out their goals and vision. Share the market study and highlight ways to work together to blend housing development with commercial goals. Maintaining commercial opportunity creates space for growth and can draw people in. Joining those two elements together can result in big benefits for the community and its residents.
Get Input from Stakeholders	Hold stakeholder meetings to determine what the community wants. Include residents as well as local government leaders, hospital or medical entities, businesses, and so on. Look at the City’s comprehensive plan and know the history. Research demographics and work those elements together. Stakeholder meetings will provide an opportunity for people to voice their needs and opinions and the project will be most effective with community buy in. Incorporate what stakeholders want so they will be excited for the result.
Create Engagement Activities	Find creative ways for the community to support the effort. PathStone invited local residents to come up with a name for the community and built that into a contest to make it fun. They published the contest and had hundreds of submissions. They created a committee to select the name and the winner received over \$500 in gift cards from area businesses. The contest got people thinking about neighborhood history and neighborhood image and increased support for the project.

PathStone serves several states (NY, NJ, PA, IN, OH, VA, DE, VT, ME) and Puerto Rico with a variety of services including workforce development, health and education, community development and housing programs – each unique to each location. PathStone began in 1969 to help farmworkers and has since grown to provide a variety of services to improve lives. At its core, the agency strives to help individuals and families become more self-sufficient.

Joshua Sankowski  
 Director of Program Relations  
 PathStone  
 Rochester, NY  
<https://pathstone.org/>  
 585-340-3370  
[Jsankowski@pathstone.org](mailto:Jsankowski@pathstone.org)

## Grandmont Rosedale Development Corporation – Detroit, Michigan

In 2016, GRDC acquired an abandoned IHOP restaurant located along a busy commercial corridor in Grandmont-Rosedale, a group of Black middle neighborhoods in Detroit, Michigan. As the organization worked through its community engagement process to determine a plan for the property, it found that one of the largest resident concerns was a lack of opportunity to age in place. This area is full of large, historic homes that are difficult to maintain, a factor that influenced the decision to develop senior housing.

Grandmont-Rosedale has five distinct Black middle neighborhoods in an area that covers approximately 2.5 square miles in northwest Detroit. About 15,000 residents live here, and the vacancy rate is low: between two and 10 percent. Income ranges vary greatly, as do the conditions of housing stock, but most homes were built in the 1920s and 30s and require a great deal of maintenance.

The IHOP restaurant on Grand River Avenue was abandoned and vacant for many years. GRDC has demolished the building and will build a new senior housing complex to include 5,400 square feet of commercial space on the ground floor, plus 42 new residential units (36 one-bedroom and six two-bedroom on upper levels). One hundred percent of the units will be for



seniors over age 55 who have incomes between 50% and 80% of the area median income. The commercial space will include at least one restaurant – as requested by neighborhood residents – and the rest of the commercial space will be divided into two additional business spaces. Construction is planned to start in 2023.

GRDC reports that the first and most important component to developing this parcel was building a community engagement process to determine what residents wanted. This was led by [Sidewalk Detroit](#), a consultant located in a nearby neighborhood, who recruited nominations for a Neighborhood Advisory Council. People could nominate themselves, or someone else, and GRDC received 20 nominations, all of whom accepted the invitation. Sidewalk Detroit began holding group meetings – both in person and virtual – to collect information on what seniors wanted. The group has worked on building a vision, naming the building, identifying preferred amenities, and creating important business partnerships. They hold public meetings so residents can voice opinions and provide feedback, plus key stakeholder interviews to gather feedback from others outside the committee.

The Neighborhood Advisory Council helped to identify amenities that residents want as well as goals for the commercial space. Preliminary findings showed the top five programming priorities to be: tech and digital literacy, dance and movement, movies and live entertainment, nutrition and cooking, and games and billiards. Based on that information, they helped plan a 2,500 square foot outdoor space that will include green space, patio tables and a small garden, plus indoor space for exercise, a lounge area and small movie theater. There will be at least two amenity rooms, plus a utility room for community use.

The restaurant concept is being developed by a separate consultant (The Lakota Group) through a separate engagement process. They discuss food ideas with residents to help find the best fit for the community and consider concepts such as convenience, price, and style of food, as well as policies around social awareness like paying a livable wage and being environmentally conscious. They interviewed five local restaurant owners in Detroit to learn about different models and best practices. Examples of models include partnering with an established restaurant that would open a satellite location but do most of the food prep at the original location, cutting the cost of building out a full commercial kitchen. Another example is a restaurant that operates as a retail butcher shop during the day and a restaurant at night, using the same space for two different purposes which creates efficiency and serves the community in multiple ways. Another restaurant exhibits artwork from local artists and offers them for sale. GRDC will continue exploring additional restaurant models during summer 2022.

GRDC's project has faced construction delays, mainly due to the current cost of construction and scarcity of materials but is working to fill the unexpected funding gap. Meanwhile, the resident engagement piece continues to be ongoing, strong, and positive.

Becki Kenderes,  
Program Director  
313.387.4732 x 120  
[becki@grandmontrosedale.com](mailto:becki@grandmontrosedale.com)  
[www.grandmontrosedale.com](http://www.grandmontrosedale.com)

Grandmont-Rosedale neighborhoods are historic middle neighborhoods. The local community development agency – Grandmont Rosedale Development Corporation – works within these neighborhoods to preserve and improve neighborhoods and create opportunity. GRDC has offered a variety of community improvement programs over the past 30 years to help the community prosper as a place to live, work and play. Programs include a local farmer's market, a co-working facility called WorkPlace, home renovation and commercial revitalization programs, neighborhood beautification, code enforcement initiatives, and more.