

Executive Summary

The Existing Conditions Report (the Report) marks the completion of Phase One in the development of the South Kelso Revitalization Strategy. It contains a comprehensive review and synthesis of the current status and trends identified within the South Kelso Neighborhood, particularly in comparison to regional and statewide trends. These findings will guide the development of recommendations in Phase Two.

In developing the Report, the Portland State University graduate student planning team (the Planning Team) reviewed:

- **Existing Planning Documents** relating to transportation, housing, downtown revitalization, economic development, education, and social services.¹
- **Social support efforts** existing in the South Kelso Neighborhood.
- **Key demographics and trends** relating to population, ethnicity, income, and other indicators.
- **Access to parks, healthy food, transportation, and exposure to environmental toxics.**

The Planning Team also sought information and feedback from the general public by first developing the ASK! (Activate South Kelso) outreach campaign, and then conducting a series of **stakeholder interviews**, two public **'Coffee Talks,'** and small **focus group** discussions. The Planning Team has launched and is currently promoting the ASK! **community-wide survey**, to close April 26, 2013.

Literature Review, Research & Findings

Education & Housing- Indicators of social and economic health show a disadvantaged community in South Kelso with significant change in the past decade. Seventy-five percent of South Kelso has completed high school, though less than 7% of adults have completed college or an advanced degree. As of 2010, more than 25% of the South Kelso population is younger than 18 years of age, and elementary school enrollment is on the rise. South Kelso reports higher rates of unemployment than the city as a whole, and 48% of housing in the neighborhood is renter-occupied.

¹ Please see the full Existing Conditions Report for a complete list of documents reviewed, findings, and data sources.

Past Planning Efforts- The 1980 Kelso Comprehensive Plan notes a need to provide “a decent home and suitable living environment for all citizens of the community” and that this must be accomplished through the provision of “a variety of dwelling types, densities, and costs in all areas of the city.” In particular, the Plan calls for new multi-family developments to be located “near commercial areas, recreation facilities, schools, employment centers, and transit routes.” Since Plan adoption, Kelso has seen a limited shift toward multi-family housing, but has reported a slight increase in density along South Pacific Avenue.

The 2007 City of Kelso Downtown Revitalization Plan recommends amending Kelso regulations to permit greater height and density in the downtown area. The Plan recommends that City efforts to promote commercial activity be focused on the existing commercial corridor along South Pacific Avenue.

The 2009 Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy for the Cowlitz-Lewis Economic Development District (CLEDD) suggests a number of strategies designed to develop a regional workforce, such as support for K-12 programs, training centers, and skills centers.

Access- In general, park access in South Kelso is high with the exception of the southern, industrial portion of the neighborhood. Community park use is inhibited by high crime rates and a lack of programming. Healthy food access is limited, with a very small portion of the neighborhood being within the recommended half-mile walking distance of the two sources of healthful food (Safeway, Cash & Carry). The United States Department of Agriculture defines a food desert as areas devoid of “fresh fruit, vegetables, and other healthful whole foods, usually found in impoverished areas.” The South Kelso Neighborhood qualifies as a food desert based on this definition.

South Kelso’s existing infrastructure shows considerable potential for a highly walkable neighborhood in terms of pedestrian navigation and proximity to schools, businesses, and employment centers. The 2012 CWOOG Great Streets Plan recommends partnerships between the City and School District to leverage state assets, such as seeking funds through the Washington State Department of Transportation’s (WSDOT’s) Safe Routes to School

Program. These cooperative efforts would increase the walkability of the neighborhood for all residents.

Local Knowledge & Stakeholder Interviews

Comments received at public events were focused around three broad topic areas: community assets, problems, and solutions. Please see the full Report for a complete list of comments.

Assets-

- **Wallace Elementary** is a strong, positive force for the neighborhood
- Friendly **small town charm**, pride, and sense of community. The quiet neighborhood and the "old charm" of houses.
- In general, the neighborhood was considered safe. Dangerous areas are street-specific.
- **The police** play a positive role in neighborhood safety.

Problems-

- High drug use and crime. Low education.
- Hungry and bored youth.
- High transient population and rental turnover.
- Lack of community, no opportunities for connection or social capital building.
- Difficult relations between businesses and the City.
- Abandoned buildings and absentee landlords.
- The lack of proper infrastructure and upkeep of streets, roads, and houses.
- The need for economic development, jobs and a revitalized commercial downtown.
- The need for more/better parks with increased safety and programming.

Solutions-

- A neighborhood association and community groups (i.e. historic homeowners group).
- Celebration of Kelso's history. Historical highlights (i.e. historical murals).
- Improve access to parks along the river and landscaping for neighborhood beautification.
- Coordinated volunteer networks for neighborhood cleanup and painting days.
- Address the source of empty lots and abandoned houses. Offer both disincentives (i.e. tax penalties) and incentives (grants and other financing mechanisms).
- Hold community events like street fairs and block parties to encourage people to socialize with their neighbors.

- Develop a community center with free events and programs for all ages, including a community garden and life skills education.
- Increasing partnerships between the City and non-profits to better coordinate social services like Work Source and CAP.

Phase Two: Recommendations

These findings highlight the need for revitalization efforts to focus on the people of South Kelso as well as physical infrastructure and beautification projects. The Planning Team is currently developing a suite of recommendations that will leverage the community's existing assets and redress its challenges. These will be presented in publically accessible objectives, strategies, and actions designed to be implemented by the City and community partners.

Focus on People- Community investment in the people of South Kelso will leverage civic pride and volunteerism while increasing the capacities of the people through workforce development and educational attainment. The Planning Team will identify opportunities for collaborative partnerships between the City, the Kelso School District, the Cowlitz-Wahkiakum Council of Governments, and social service agencies. The South Kelso Revitalization Strategy will outline programs to build greater social capital, community engagement, and employability. Strategies will include funding options, recommended partnerships, and state and national programs.

Focus on Place- Solutions rooted in the physical environment will leverage South Kelso's historic small town charm, walkability, transportation access, natural amenities, and appealing aesthetics. The Planning Team will present solutions to spur greater residential property upkeep, downtown physical investments and beautification programs, enhanced pedestrian environments, as well as options for building on Wallace Elementary School's role as a community center and social service hub. The final South Kelso Revitalization Strategy will outline programs, funding, opportunities for collaboration, and recommend actions for each revitalization actor, whether community, agency, or governmental partner.

Timeline- The first draft of The South Kelso Revitalization Strategy Report will be completed May 13, 2013. The final draft will be submitted to the City on June 10, 2013.