



1. The North End in Context

Settled in 1636 and established in 1852, the City of Springfield is the third largest urban center in Massachusetts. Due to its significant architecture and innovative business ventures, Springfield has earned several distinct claims including the title of the “City of Firsts.” Many well known companies have roots here and have made Springfield an important base for their operations. These companies include Massachusetts Mutual Life Insurance Company, Friendly’s Ice Cream Corporation, Milton Bradley, Peter Pan Bus Company, and Smith & Wesson. Amongst these is the Bay State Medical Center, a well-recognized teaching and research facility that has a significant history in the Springfield area and particularly in the North End neighborhood. However, in spite of Springfield’s history of

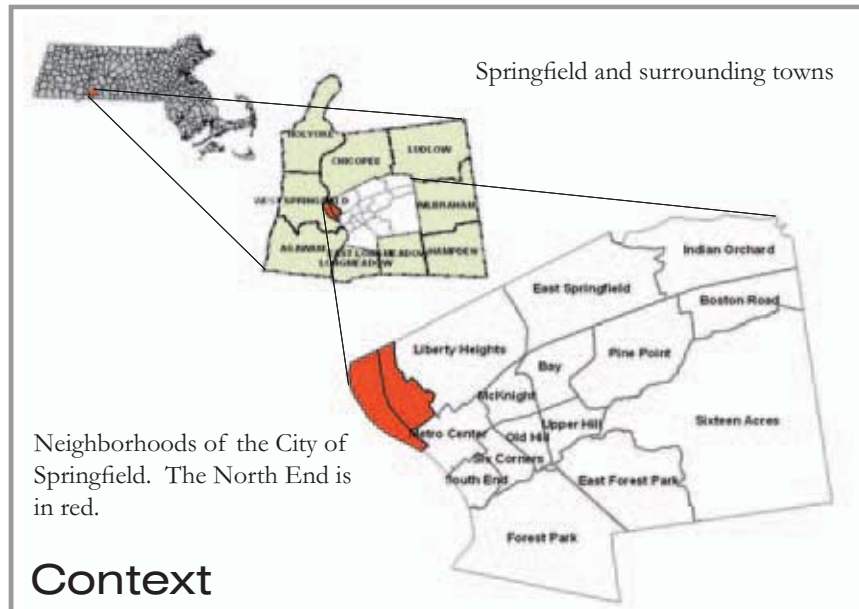
	Springfield	Massachusetts	United States
% of households below poverty level	19.3%	6.7%	9.2%
% of children under 18 below poverty level	33.9%	10.1%	13.6%
% of Hispanic households below poverty level	53.5%	28.5%	20%

economic vitality and innovation, poverty is an increasing concern with almost twenty percent of Springfield families living below the federal poverty level.

The North End

The North End is a neighborhood with approximately 10,000 residents. The neighborhood was split into two sides, known as Plainfield or Brightwood on the west and Memorial Square on the east, by the construction of Interstate 91 in 1961. Defined by the borders of the Connecticut River, downtown and an industrial area to the south, the North End is mostly residential. Since the early 1960s, the North End community has attracted a large Puerto Rican population: in 2004 over 75% of the residents in the North End are of Puerto Rican heritage.

The first Puerto Rican residents were attracted to Springfield and the North End community in particular because of migrant jobs available in the Connecticut River Valley farms. Within this North End community, increasing numbers of Puerto Ricans moved to



Springfield to reunite with friends and family and to work in local farms and Springfield's manufacturing industry. However, the North End that Puerto Rican migrants encountered in the 1960s is different than the North End that exists today. Many of the challenges that are currently facing the City of Springfield as a whole are mirrored and even magnified in the two neighborhoods of the North End - Plainfield and Memorial Square. Economic and health data shown to the right illustrate the depth of the poverty.

Despite its current economic and health challenges, the North End in 2004 displays many wonderful qualities. In the 1990 census, 68% of families reported tenure of over ten years in the community. Family structures are strong with many mutually supportive extended families. Puerto Rican culture, particularly through music, food and dance, maintains its prominence within the community and is seen as a source of pride. Voter participation rates reach forty percent for board elections of the local citizen's council.



*Gerena School
from Thomas
Street*

Socio-Economic Characteristics of the North End

- The poorest census tract in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts
- A 50% high school completion rate (a statistic which is even lower for males)
- The lowest educational attainment in the City of Springfield
- A population of which 10% passes through the Hampden County Correctional Center each year
- High rates of asthma and diabetes
- Other health related challenges, including high teen birth and infant mortality rates as well as low child immunization rates

US Census 2000

German Gerena Magnet School

With a strong spirit of community involvement and the desire to change, organizations in the neighborhood came together in 1995 and looked to the past for answers. The committee of organizers came to the conclusion that in order to put a stop to the negative trends existing in the community the active participation of all residents would be needed. The key to change would depend on the ability to motivate those previously uninvolved residents to become part of this process. Although many organizations exist throughout the North End, the residents lack a community center for activities to take place. Many remembered that the desire for a community center has been an ongoing struggle over the past 25 years and that a community center of activity once existed within the Gerena School in the 1980s.

It was with this memory that the desire to make this a vibrant place once again surfaced and a strategic process began with the formation of the “Campus Committee.” The goals behind the desire for a community center are to update the initial community vision and improve it based on the changes that have occurred in the North End over the past 15 years. Although the physical aspect of this project focuses on the school building as the heart of the community, Gerena is envisioned as a community hub of activity that links all organizations to one center.

In 1958 the City of Springfield saw the North End as an appropriate site for urban renewal. The City of Springfield’s Urban Renewal Plan of 1958 attributed the decline of the neighborhood to the construction of the railroad in the 1870s. In order to reverse the problems of “blight” a plan was proposed to provide highway access into the neighborhood and City of Springfield - not only to capture out-of-town customers, but also to clear away older housing stock and make room for new commercial and industrial uses. The plan was eventually carried out, bringing Interstates 91 and 291 through the heart of the neighborhood.



*Main Street,
Thomas Street
Park, and Villa
Vista*



*Gerena
School
hallway*

Gerena 1975

After the completion of the highway in 1961, ideas were proposed to connect the two sides of the North End. One of these involved the construction of a glass-enclosed walkway over the transportation corridor. However, the railroad refused to concede air rights. The City then opted for a tunnel design under the highway and railroad, and created the uniquely subterranean Gerena Elementary School in 1975. The tunnel model required the school to be built also underneath the sewer lines, which has created persistent challenges for the maintenance of the building. In addition, Interstate 91 was built on top of a stream bed running southwest to meet the Connecticut River. Though the path of the stream does not run directly through the school, its design makes it the lowest inhabitable point in the neighborhood and puts the school in the floodplain of the stream.

Gerena as Community Center

In 1975 the Gerena School created new opportunities to connect the two neighborhoods physically and programmatically. Peter Levanos was hired as the Community Director of Education for the school. His position was part of the programmatic vision for the school, where in addition to an academic setting it would act as a place for community families to access resources. The school was accessible from 2pm-10pm and offered extensive adult education classes such as English as a Second Language, GED, and learning Spanish as a native language. The North End Community Center also provided programs for youth. The facilities also included a senior center, a branch of the public library, a public pool and gym run by the Parks Department, and health and dental services.

In the 1980s this vibrancy began to slowly dwindle with budget cuts and damage forced by two large floods (late 1980s & 1994) which caused organizations to relocate outside of the campus. These were just some of the factors that began the decline of the original concept of Gerena as a Community Campus Center. Now, 20 years later, a campus committee has formed to rejuvenate Gerena into the community center it once was and adapt it to the new needs of residents.



*Interface
between
Gerena and
Chestnut
Schools*