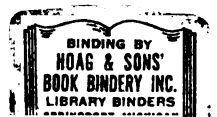


THE FAILURE TO MEET THE NEEDS
OF A NEIGHBORHOOD GROUP:
A CASE STUDY OF THE
TOWAR GARDENS COMMUNITY

Thesis for the Degree of M. U. P.
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY
JOHN A. BERNDT
1970

THESIS



~~Q 9 12 14~~
K ~~12 14~~
~~12 14~~ R8
E ~~12 14~~ 071
~~12 14~~
Q ~~12 14~~ 35
J ~~12 14~~ 335
d ~~12 14~~ 067
~~12 14~~

MAY 07 2007

FEB 12 2007

MAY 11 2007

FEB 05 2007

ABSTRACT

THE FAILURE TO MEET THE NEEDS OF A NEIGHBORHOOD GROUP: A CASE STUDY OF THE TOWAR GARDENS COMMUNITY

By

John A. Berndt

A governmental unit cannot ignore the needs of any segment of its population without damaging the political unit as a whole, as well as the morale and pride of the particular neighborhood group or sub-community. Most studies dealing with this problem have focused on urban core neighborhoods in relation to urban renewal, model cities, or freeway projects. These frequently studied neighborhoods are most often composed of poor people, frequently black, who have few other choices open to them for a place to live. In contrast, suburban areas, even "upper class" areas, often have neighborhoods with problems related to discrimination and inadequate government services.

The method used to analyze this problem is a case study of the Towar Gardens area in Meridian Charter Township, Ingham County, Michigan. As a scholarly device and

analytic tool, the case study has been used for many years, particularly in the field of political science. The case study approach is not without inherent problems, one being that making generalizations from them is somewhat hazardous; however, this approach does lend a note of realism to an otherwise totally dogmatic or theoretical approach.

The Towar Gardens area, composed of five subdivisions of which only one is actually "Towar Gardens," has been neglected by public officials since it was platted in the mid-1920's. This neglect has been primarily the non-enforcement of codes and ordinances dealing with nuisance factors, such as junk automobiles, of which there are a great number in the Towar Gardens area. This neglect has been compounded by the lack of communication between township officials and the people of Towar Gardens. There have been no attempts to discuss the short and long range solutions to their problems with the residents of Towar Gardens. Instead, the township has reacted only when a crisis situation has prompted it to do so.

One result of government neglect has been to perpetuate the bad image that Towar Gardens has had in the Meridian/East Lansing community for many years. The ostracism directed toward Towar Gardens residents has been particularly damaging to the young people (who

attend East Lansing schools) who have a higher drop-out rate from high school than other East Lansing students, and who are shunned by other students.

Recently, a group of Towar Gardens residents banded together to demand the public services which they felt they should be getting. They formed the Towar Action Committee which has been partially successful in getting the neighborhood cleaned up, and in securing badly needed recreational facilities from East Lansing school officials. Much remains to be done, however, particularly in upgrading the image of the area.

Although solutions to problems such as those found in Towar Gardens require the dedication of many individuals and groups, the professional planner can play an important role in helping to upgrade the social as well as the physical environment. To effectively play this role, the planner must: (1) make a commitment to help solve problem situations normally thought to be outside of the realm of the "physical planner," (2) be perceptive in recognizing the social problems of neighborhood groups within the community, (3) initiate and maintain open channels of communication between the government agency and citizen groups, as well as intergovernmentally, (4) act as a staff advisor on special problems to political leaders, (5) coordinate efforts of other groups capable of solving some facet of the problem situation, (6) get

John A. Berndt

whatever aid is necessary to solve the problem, (7) encourage citizen participation, and (8) act as an advocate for the people and their right to a decent physical and social environment.

THE FAILURE TO MEET THE NEEDS OF A NEIGHBORHOOD GROUP:
A CASE STUDY OF THE TOWAR GARDENS COMMUNITY

By

John A. Berndt

A THESIS

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF URBAN PLANNING

Department of Urban Planning and Landscape Architecture

1970

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The preparation of this thesis was aided through the efforts of many people. First, I would like to thank my advisor, Donn L. Anderson, whose suggestions on organization and content were very helpful in making this a rewarding learning experience.

Also, a debt of gratitude is owed to the residents of Towar Gardens and members of the Towar Action Committee who were willing to discuss at length their experiences and thoughts concerning their community. The information supplied by past and present Meridian Township officials is also greatly appreciated.

Finally, I would like to thank Jeanne and Matt who provided much of the incentive needed for this undertaking.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
INTRODUCTION	1
I. COMMUNITY NEEDS NEBLECTED	12
The Depression Years	12
The First Zoning Ordinance	13
The Towar Gardens Extension Club	16
The Lets-Do-It Club	17
First Planning Commission	19
A Charter Township	22
The Towar Action Committee	25
Summary	47
II. TOWAR GARDENS IN PERSPECTIVE--ITS HISTORY AND CHARACTERISTICS	51
Early Settlement	52
First Platted Subdivisions	53
Population Characteristics	59
Housing and Environment	64
Social Problems	70
III. THE FUTURE OF TOWAR GARDENS	81
The Role of East Lansing Public Schools	81
The Role of Meridian Township	91
The Role of the Towar Gardens Community	107
Summary	116
IV. A BROADER PERSPECTIVE: LESSONS FOR PLANNERS (AND OTHERS)	119
The Changing Role of Planners	122
BIBLIOGRAPHY	131

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. Location of the Towar Gardens Area in Meridian Township	2
2. Platted Subdivisions in the Towar Gardens Area Including Important Landmarks	54

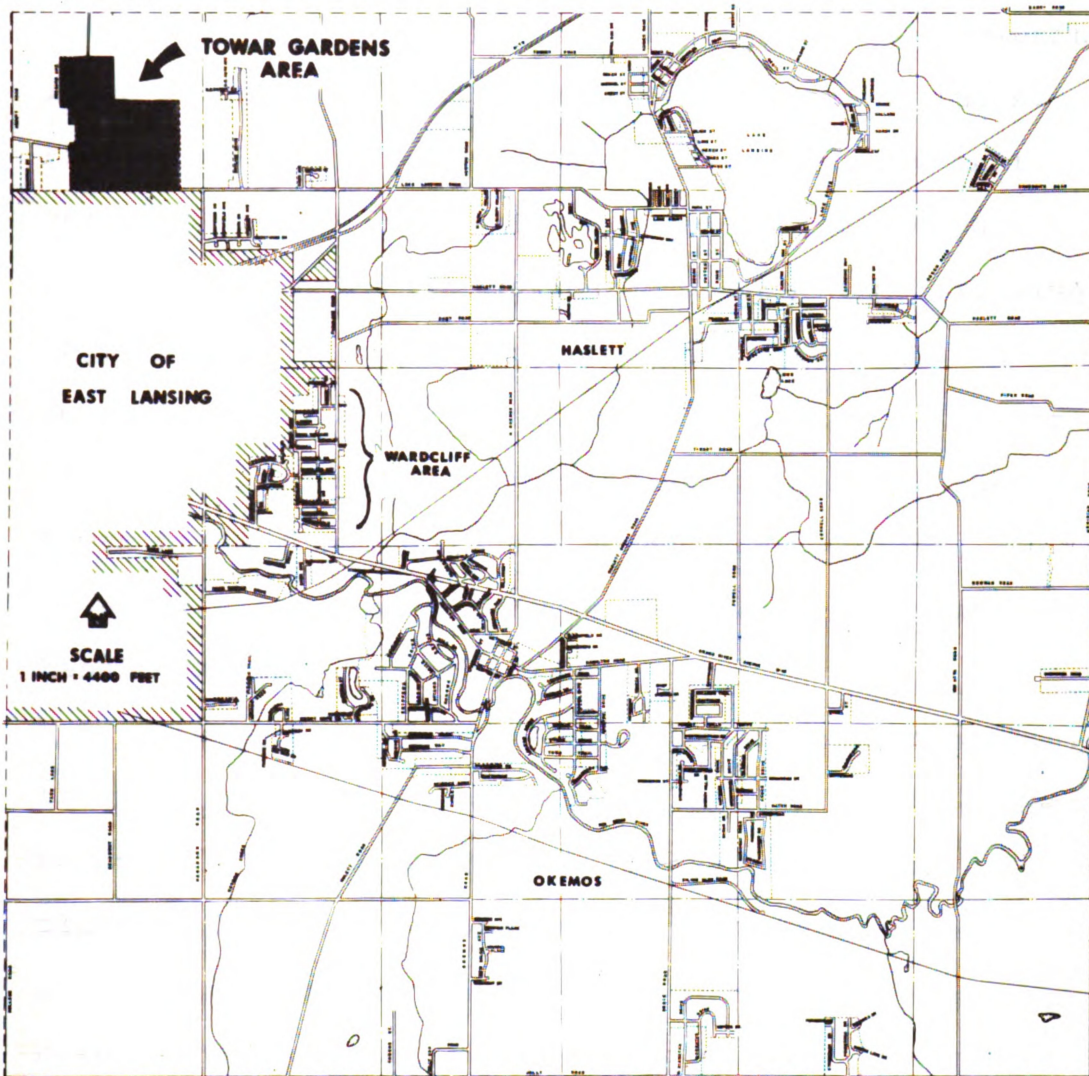
INTRODUCTION

A neighborhood in Meridian Township commonly referred to as Towar Gardens has unique problems unlike those found in most areas of Meridian Township (See Figure 1). These problems include substandard housing, unkempt yards, lack of recreational facilities, and most seriously, an East Lansing/Meridian viewpoint that Towar Gardens and the people who live there are in some way inferior. The township government, including the planning commission, has not recognized that these unique problems require special attention and special action oriented programs. With these special attempts on the part of the government officials, the Towar Gardens community will be an asset to themselves and the rest of Meridian Township, but without some kind of remedial action, the animosity and suspicion which has created a wall between the Towar Gardens community and the rest of Meridian Township and East Lansing will be self perpetuating to the detriment of everyone concerned.

The purpose of this study is to show that a governmental unit such as Meridian Township cannot ignore the needs of any segment of its population without damaging the image of the township as a whole and, in particular,

Figure 1

LOCATION OF THE TOWAR GARDENS AREA IN MERIDIAN TOWNSHIP



without damaging the morale and pride of a neighborhood group and the confidence they have in their government to be concerned enough about their problems to help solve them. The purpose, furthermore, is to show that alternatives were open to the township board and planning commission which would have helped the Towar Gardens community upgrade its physical appearance and community image without significantly larger outlays of funds. Finally, the purpose of this thesis is to show that remedial actions can still be taken by the township board and planning commission to achieve the following objectives: 1) upgrade the physical appearance of Towar Gardens, 2) provide recreational facilities for the young people, 3) improve relations between the Towar Gardens community and township government, and 4) upgrade the image of Towar Gardens in the East Lansing/Meridian community.

The problem to be discussed in this thesis, i.e., the reluctance of a governmental unit to meet the special needs of a neighborhood group, is a popular one in recent planning literature. However, most studies have dealt with urban core neighborhoods in relation to urban renewal, model cities, or freeway projects. These frequently studied neighborhoods are most often composed of poor people, frequently black, who have few other choices open to them for a place to live. Also, most

of these neighborhoods would require large sums of money from outside sources to alleviate their problem situations.

In contrast, the Towar Gardens community is unique because it does not conform to this typical well-studied problem. The vast majority of people in Towar Gardens live there because they like it there and they want to live there. Many could afford to live in "better" neighborhoods. Their problems are primarily related to the longtime reluctance of Meridian Township government to enforce codes and ordinances in that area and, more importantly, the image and reputation the area has held in the minds of other Meridian Township and East Lansing residents. To correct these problems, particularly the latter, would take the concerted effort of many individuals and groups, but it would cost little in terms of public funds.

The thesis format follows four subject areas divided into chapters. Chapter I discusses the failure of the township government to deal with the problems of the Towar Gardens area on either a short-range basis or on a long-range planning basis.

Chapter II places the failures discussed in Chapter I in a historical perspective and explains why these failures took place. A history of the Towar Gardens area will include how and why it grew as it did within

the context of the Meridian/East Lansing community, along with an analysis of its present characteristics and problems concerning population, land uses and land ownership, housing and environment, and social interaction.

Chapter III discusses what the Meridian Township government, particularly the planning commission and staff, can do now to alleviate the problems identified in the Towar Gardens community. This includes the potential role of the citizen's committee recommended in the "701" study concerned with information and communication in the Township. Included also are recommendations for a closer liaison between the township government and East Lansing school officials in the area of indoor and outdoor recreation, a closer working relationship with the Towar Action Committee, and greater coordination between the various volunteer groups doing work in the Towar Gardens area. Also discussed are the roles these individual agencies, governmental and volunteer, could play should the township choose not to coordinate them.

Chapter IV summarizes the findings in the first four chapters and explains how the knowledge gained from this study could be helpful to a planning commission or professional planner confronted with a similar situation. Certainly, if the knowledge gained from a particular case

study such as this one is limited to this area exclusively, then there is little value in pursuing such a study; however, if valid generalized conclusions can be presented, as I believe they can, then the value of this study should be self evident.

An area with as many interesting characteristics as the Towar Gardens community cannot be neglected in respect to being studied, even though it can be neglected in respect to solving its problems. The Towar Gardens area has been the object of many academic studies, principally by students in various disciplines at Michigan State University. Unfortunately, all of the studies uncovered have been at the subthesis level which makes them very difficult to obtain. Only two academic studies have been made available for use in this project; one is a project undertaken by a study group in an Urban Sociology class, and the second is a paper prepared by Mr. James Jennings, principal of Whitehills Elementary school.

Several studies of a non-academic nature have been undertaken in the Towar Gardens area which can be broken down into two categories: governmental agency studies, and non-governmental studies. Most of the latter studies have been undertaken by local newspaper reporters, especially those on the staff of the Meridian Towne Courier, which last year ran a three part series on the characteristics and problems of the Towar Gardens community.

The governmental studies include those undertaken by Meridian Township, Ingham County and, indirectly, the federal government through OEO. Meridian Township studies have been undertaken by the planning department under a federal "701" comprehensive planning grant. These studies are essentially those of the technical background studies based on 1960 Census data updated when possible by the 1965 Tri-County Regional Planning Commission's Home Interview Survey. More recent information is available from the Meridian Township planning commission's housing study.

The Ingham County Health Department has prepared a study of the Towar Gardens area as a part of Project ECHO (Evidence of Community Health Organization), which contains information on housing quality as well as nuisance factors such as rubble in yards and the presence of junked automobiles.

An informal study of community attitudes in the Towar Gardens area was undertaken by the North Side Community Action Center located in the City of Lansing.

It can be seen from the kinds of studies undertaken by academicians, government agencies, and non-governmental agencies that the problems of the Towar Gardens area have been studied; however, these studies taken singly or in aggregate are clearly inadequate to devise the kinds of programs necessary to solve the

problems of the community. The investigation undertaken in this paper is necessary because no person or organization has tied together the background material in a comprehensive manner with recommendations for action programs. Without showing the interrelationships of the characteristics and problems of an area and its residents, together with a history of the evolution of these characteristics and problems, there can be no realistic appraisal of the community's future development and the ability to help solve its problems.

The data for this thesis was obtained from a variety of sources. Besides those sources already mentioned as studies related to the Towar Gardens community, original research was gathered from both written documents and from personal interviews. Written documents used were chiefly those of Meridian Township operating departments including assessing, planning, and the clerk's office. Personal interviews were from both primary and secondary sources; primary sources included residents of the Towar Gardens area, East Lansing school officials, Meridian Township officials, and the director for the North Side Community Action Center, while the major secondary source was a member of the planning department staff, a social worker who prepared an information and communication plan as part of the "701" comprehensive planning program.

The methodology used in this thesis was the case study. As a scholarly device, the case study has been used for many years, particularly in the field of political science.¹ Some persons consider any reconstruction of a past event to be a case study, however, according to an organization deeply involved in the case study approach, the Board for the Inter-university Case Program, the term is used in the following way:

... a case study consists of research focused upon a particular administrative decision or series of closely related decisions; its unique character lies in the fact that it attempts to illuminate the circumstances relevant to the decision and to explore the causes that had direct influence in determining the outcome.²

An assumption can be made that the case study method is a valuable learning tool for urban planners since Alan Altshuler's book, The City Planning Process: A Political Analysis, comprised of four case studies, is required reading for the American Institute of Planners full membership oral examination.³

The case study approach, however, is not without inherent problems, one of the foremost being that since case studies deal with individual decisions, they

¹Roscoe C. Martin, et. al., Decisions in Syracuse (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), p. 17.

²Ibid., p. 17.

³AIP Newsletter, Vol. 4, No. 10, October 1969, p. 11.

... lend themselves well to descriptive particularization but ill to conceptual generalization; they illuminate the issues and actors at a given point of decision, but provide a very insecure basis for general conclusions about administrative behavior.⁴

It has been suggested by some experts that a series of case studies dealing with a single problem area be undertaken as a means of promoting generalizations.⁵ It was hoped that this could in some way be accomplished in this thesis study and, to a limited extent, it has been possible. The "series of case studies" is, in effect, the series of administrative decisions or non-decisions and the resulting crisis or confrontation between various governmental agencies and the Towar Gardens community. One factor limiting the effectiveness of this series of case studies is a very important one, i.e., the personal bias of the person writing the account.

Because the writer of this thesis is actively engaged with programs and plans for the Towar Gardens community as a staff planner with the Meridian Township planning commission, it is impossible to write a completely unbiased case study. It can be said that objectivity was strived for to the greatest degree possible, and that it is hoped any undesirable effects by possible biases will be more than off-set by the additional insight gained by being an active participant in the planning and, to a limited extent, the decision-making process.

⁴Martin, op. cit., p. 18.

⁵Ibid., p. 18.

CHAPTER I

COMMUNITY NEEDS NEGLECTED

The failure of Meridian Township government to adequately provide the services needed by the Towar Gardens community dates back to the beginning of the community itself. This failure has taken a variety of forms, but those focused upon in this chapter deal mainly with the lack of adequate code enforcement programs, the lack of providing recreational facilities, and the lack of communication, except during certain crisis situations, to deal with their most significant problem, that being their image. The first documentation of these failures dates back to the depression years of the 1930's.

The Depression Years

The economic depression beginning in 1929 was a period of anxiety and frustration for the people of Towar Gardens and Meridian Township, as it was for the country as a whole. Plans to build good houses disintegrated as unemployment spread to almost every family's breadwinner. In 1935 the WPA (Works Progress Administration) was instituted on a nation-wide scale

to help provide meaningful jobs to millions of men unemployed. The projects undertaken included local improvement programs on roads, public buildings, sewer and water systems, and recreational projects.¹

The WPA projects in Meridian Township centered around improving the surface water drainage system which had always been a problem due to the large extent of very poorly drained soils in the township. Interestingly, of the seven drains in Meridian Township built or renovated during the WPA era (1935-1940), none were in the Towar Gardens area.² It is alleged by one member of the Towar Gardens community, and acknowledged by at least one township official, that drains were improved on the private land of Supervisor John Green when other areas of the township were in much greater need of these improvements. According to one Towar Gardens resident, one such area of need was the Towar area, however, requests for these improvements went unheeded by township officials.³

¹Charles A. Beard and George H. E. Smith, The Old Deal and the New (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1940), p. 221.

²Meridian Charter Township Planning Department, Meridian Charter Township Natural Conditions Study (Technical Memorandum No. 4, Preliminary Report, Haslett, Michigan: December 1968), pp. 34-38.

³Statement by Rev. John King, personal interview, January 26, 1970.

The First Zoning Ordinance

Not much controversy occurred between Towar Gardens and the township government during the war years; apparently everyone was fighting for the same cause during this period of history. However, shortly after the war ended, a committee was appointed by the Township board under Supervisor Henry Platz to write the first zoning ordinance for the township. The new ordinance was welcomed by residents of the Towar Gardens community who saw in it a legal way to improve the appearance, and subsequently, the status of their neighborhood. The people in Towar Gardens campaigned for the ordinance and voted heavily in favor of it in a township-wide referendum.⁴

C. O. Wilkins became township supervisor in 1947, the year before the zoning ordinance was approved by the electorate. According to Earl C. Maynard, the first building inspector and zoning administrator in Meridian Township (1947-1950), the zoning ordinance was enforced very unfairly during the administration of Mr. Wilkins. Mr. Maynard wanted to enforce the ordinance fairly throughout the township, but the supervisor granted special favors to some residents. For example, Mr. Maynard refused to issue a building permit for a residential lot on Haslett Road because it was not large enough under

⁴Statement by Rev. John King, personal interview, January 24, 1970.

the zoning ordinance for a house. The petitioner then went to Mr. Wilkins who promptly issued him an illegal building permit.⁵

There was considerable disagreement between the zoning board and the township board concerning enforcement of the zoning ordinance. A procedure for enforcement was suggested by Mr. John King (now Rev. King) a member of the zoning board and a resident of the Towar Gardens area, whereby the zoning administrator would furnish the zoning board with a list of all violators of the ordinance each month.⁶ Violation notices were then sent to these persons by the township board after a recommendation by the zoning board.

Apparently this procedure was not very effective because approximately eight months later, in June 1950, Mr. King suggested that the township board and zoning board draw up a new procedure of enforcement.⁷ The day after this recommendation was made, Mr. King presented a letter to the township board setting forth three actions during the previous three years which he considered illegal.⁸ Three weeks later, the township attorney was

⁵Statement by Earl C. Maynard, personal interview, January 27, 1970.

⁶Meridian Township Zoning Board, Minutes (Haslett, Michigan: November 7, 1949).

⁷Ibid., June 5, 1950.

⁸Meridian Township Board, Minutes (Haslett, Michigan: June 6, 1950).

told to advise Mr. King that the Attorney General and prosecuting attorney refused to grant an opinion on the three actions Mr. King considered to be illegal.⁹ It is unknown what these three "illegal" acts were; however, it does point out the antagonism between the township board and a member of the zoning board from Towar Gardens.

A new zoning administrator, Earl Wilson, was hired in 1950 after Mr. Maynard resigned the position. Relations between the township board and zoning board did not improve as a result of new personnel, however. Two months after he was appointed, Mr. Wilson submitted his resignation as zoning administrator, but the zoning board convinced him to stay on the job.¹⁰ The reason for Mr. Wilson's resignation, according to Mr. King, was that the township board would not allow him to enforce the zoning ordinance.¹¹

The policy of not enforcing the zoning ordinance has continued to be a point of contention between the Towar Gardens community and the township board until the present time. The township board minutes of the past thirty years have numerous references to "make an investigation" of zoning violations, or "write the necessary

⁹ Ibid., June 26, 1950.

¹⁰ Meridian Township Zoning Board, op. cit., August 25, 1950.

¹¹ Statement by Rev. John King, personal interview, January 26, 1970.

letters" to zoning violators, and even "to initiate legal action" against a zoning violator in Towar Gardens; however, legal action has never in fact been carried to the courtroom in connection with a violation of the zoning ordinance or the nuisance ordinance in Meridian Township.¹² It should be emphasized that there appeared to be no discrimination against the Towar Gardens community in enforcement of the zoning ordinance; it was unenforced equally throughout the township. The important point to note here is that the Towar Gardens community needed the enforcement of township ordinances more than other areas of the Township because of its unique physical, social, and economic characteristics which will be explored in a subsequent chapter of this report.

The Towar Gardens Extension Club

The concern of Towar Gardens residents for the appearance and environmental quality of their neighborhood is not a recent phenomenon. In September, 1954, an Extension Club from Towar Gardens appeared before the zoning board and complained about the objectionable features of a junk yard located in their community. This particular junk yard, owned by Arthur Carn, had been a matter of concern for several years; however, nothing

¹²This was true at the time when the first draft of this thesis was written; however, in February 1970, warrants were issued for the first time to violators of the nuisance ordinance.

had been done about it except to "recommend to the Township Board that the Township Attorney Fred Newman check the law and recommend a course of action...."¹³ Other conditions in the Towar Gardens area were discussed by the Extension Club and the zoning board at this meeting, and the committee was advised to attend the October (1954) meeting of the township board.¹⁴ Whether or not this meeting took place with the township board is unknown; however, nothing was mentioned concerning such a meeting in the next several months' township board minutes.

The Lets-Do-It Club

In October 1955, a group of residents from Towar Gardens attended a zoning board meeting and asked questions pertaining to the improvement of their neighborhood. They were advised to form a Home Owners Association and then, by letter and in person, to carry their requests to the township board.¹⁵ One of the major concerns of this group was the same as the Extension Club's complaint the previous year: the unlicensed junk yard within their neighborhood.

The matter was probably brought before the township board at their November 1955 meeting, but no mention

¹³Meridian Township Planning Commission, Minutes (Haslett, Michigan: September 21, 1954).

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid., October 18, 1955.

is made of it in the minutes of that board meeting. The next month, however, the following entry was placed in the Township Board minutes.

It was moved by Trustee O'Brien that the Supervisor and the Township Attorney investigate the charges made by the Let's Do It Club of Towar Gardens re: The Arthur Carn unlicensed used car lot or junk yard, and report back at the January meeting as to the advisability of instigating suit.¹⁶

There was no mention of such a report in the January township board minutes. It appears, though, that the problem was not resolved since it was again referred to during the zoning board meeting in May 1956.¹⁷

A period of more than ten years elapsed before Towar Gardens organized another committee to cope with what they considered to be inadequate governmental services for their neighborhood. During this period, two events occurred which changed Meridian Township's governmental functions significantly: the formation of a planning commission in 1958, and the change from a general law township to a charter township in 1959.

The formation of a planning commission and the change to a charter township form of government provided extra resources to the entire community in respect to services the government was able to provide. These extra services were possible through additional governmental

¹⁶Meridian Township Board, op. cit., December 6, 1955.

¹⁷Meridian Township Planning Commission, op. cit., May 15, 1956.

powers and responsibilities, through additional tax revenues, and through an increasing sophistication of persons connected with the township government. This increased capability of the government to provide services did not help the people of Towar Gardens with their most critical needs, i.e., improvement of the environment through enforcement of codes and ordinances, the provision of adequate recreational facilities, and, most important, an upgrading of their image in the eyes of the entire Meridian/East Lansing community. Again, it should be mentioned that this was not due to any overt discriminatory actions on the part of Meridian Township officials; it was simply a lack of responding to the special needs of a particular neighborhood. This was a period of tremendous growth for the township, along with the myriad problems associated with a rapidly urbanizing community, e.g., providing water and sewer facilities, disposal of solid waste, and coping with ever-increasing volumes of surface-water run-off. Still, much could have been done within the financial capabilities of the township government to help the Towar Gardens community. This help could have come from the planning commission as well as the township board.

First Planning Commission

The first planning commission in Meridian Township was formed in 1958 on a recommendation from the zoning

board to the township board. The members of the new planning commission were well versed in the principles and practices of urban planning. They formed a number of committees to deal with zoning, master planning, and streets and highways.¹⁸ In 1959 they adopted a Master Plan for Major Streets and Highways, and by 1960 they completely rewrote the zoning ordinance to include more sophisticated concepts such as planned unit developments and the special use permit. A Development Plan was completed in 1964 which delineated neighborhood units and projected their needs for various community facilities. This work was completed with the help of a part-time staff comprised of urban planning students from Michigan State University; much of the work was done by the commission members themselves, one of whom was on the faculty in the School of Urban Planning and Landscape Architecture at Michigan State University. In 1966, the planning commission in conjunction with a newly formed parks and recreation committee prepared a Master Plan for Parks and Recreation. This plan, along with the Development Plan, took no special notice of the Towar Gardens community with its special problems and needs. Planning principles and standards were applied equally to Okemos, Haslett, and

¹⁸Ibid., February 7, 1958.

Towar Gardens, although it is apparent from recent studies that their needs are very different.¹⁹

The residents of Towar Gardens did not approach the planning commission with their problems as they had done with the zoning board. The residents of the community apparently did not know that the planning commission could have helped them formulate goals and action programs to help meet their special needs, and there was no overt attempt from the planning commission to explain to the Towar Gardens community how they could be helped through planning programs. From a history of being referred from the zoning board to the township board, it is understandable why the people of Towar Gardens never approached the planning commission; the zoning board only made recommendations and had no power to directly improve the physical or social conditions in the Towar Gardens community.

In order for local neighborhood associations, such as those formed in the Towar Gardens community, to cope with planning and contribute to community development decision-making, at least three broad factors must be taken into consideration: These are, (1) the motivation for participation, (2) the organizational structure through which participation occurs, and (3) the

¹⁹Meridian Township Planning Department, Preliminary data: Information and Communications Plan (unpublished report, Haslett, Michigan).

communication process.²⁰ The first two of these factors were certainly present in the Towar Gardens community. The community's leadership and organizational structure were manifested in the two neighborhood improvement groups in 1954 and 1955; it is apparent, too, that motivation was present or else these groups would never have been formed. The missing link, then, was communication. Township officials, including the planning commission, never really understood the special needs of the Towar Gardens area and, although the residents of Towar Gardens often voiced their disapproval of township government, no attempt was made on the part of township officials to bridge the communication gap and explain what their difficulties were in providing some of the services requested by Towar Gardens.

A Charter Township

If the formation of a planning commission did not help the people of Towar Gardens, what about the change from a general law township to a charter township? The "charter" of a charter township delineates by state statute exactly what powers the township government possesses, the major difference from a general law township being a higher millage limitation and the ability to bond for public improvements.

²⁰John C. Freeman, "The Potential of Local Citizen Organizations for Contributing to the Planning Decision Making Process" (unpublished Master's thesis, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan, 1966), pp. 5-6.

Meridian Township took advantage of these additional financial resources to provide many of the public services needed by the community. In 1961 an ambitious program was begun to provide sewer for the urbanized portions of the township. A first priority, and rightfully so, was to provide sanitary sewers around Lake Lansing which was rapidly becoming an open sewer in itself. In 1963 Towar Gardens was provided with sewer facilities. A major enlargement of the township water system was undertaken in 1965, and although Towar Gardens is not yet served with public water, the area will be getting this service when a special assessment district is established for a current bond issue. Gradual increases in the millage rate were used to augment the police and fire departments and to provide some new services such as a full-time planner in 1965 and a township engineer in 1969.

Although a full-time assistant building inspector was hired in 1967 to help with the increasing work loads of the building department, not many changes took place in respect to enforcing the zoning ordinance. Zoning violations continued throughout the township, not only in the Towar Gardens area. In addition to a zoning ordinance, the township board passed a nuisance ordinance in 1958 which stipulated that

No person, who is legally responsible for any lot or premises within the Township, shall place,

deposit, accumulate, throw, scatter, or leave refuse, waste, trash, garbage, or other such materials on or about his premises in a manner which breeds vermin, rodents, disease or contagion, or which constitutes a menace to the public health.²¹

If the violation is not correct within a reasonable length of time, the township may do the work by contract or hire and assess the cost of such abatement against the lot.²²

The zoning ordinance and nuisance ordinance were not enforced any better under a charter township form of government than a general law township. An editorial in the weekly newspaper echoed the sentiments felt by many persons in the community and, although it dealt with a lax township government attitude concerning sewer hookups, it also applied to enforcement of other ordinances. The editorial said,

Citizens often need prodding. We are prodded to obey the speed limits by enforcement officers. We get a postal greeting when we forget our taxes.

For 3 years 11 residents near Lake Lansing have avoided hooking their properties to the Meridian Township sewage disposal system. It's a natural inclination to avoid taking a loan to finance a hook up....

Meridian Township officials claim they are understaffed. Whether the township is understaffed or unorganized, 3 years is a long enough period before things get rolling....²³

²¹Meridian Charter Township, Nuisance Ordinance: Ordinance No. 18 (Haslett, Michigan: Adopted April 15, 1958), Section 3B.

²²Ibid., Section 4A.

²³Editorial in the Meridian Towne Courier, "Meridian law not enforced," January 28, 1969.

This editorial was written in the same issue of the Meridian Towne Courier as the first of a three part series dealing with the Towar Gardens area and its problems. An editor's note at the beginning of the article declared that nothing had been written on the Towar Gardens area for several years. It was shortly after this series of articles appeared that the residents of Towar Gardens became keenly aware of the fact that they would have to organize to get the recognition they needed in their community.

The Towar Action Committee

The formation of the Towar Action Committee (TAC) was an outgrowth of years of frustration on the part of Towar Gardens residents who had become accustomed to having their needs overlooked or ignored by public officials. The community organization which led to the formation of TAC began in Fall, 1968 after Mr. James Jennings was named principal of Whitehills elementary school.

When Mr. Jennings applied for the position of principal at Whitehills school, he was warned that it was a real "problem school" because of the social, economic, and education diversities of the two distinct communities which the school served.²⁴ Despite these warnings, Mr.

²⁴James M. Jennings, "The Case of an Elementary Principal's Involvement with a School Community" (paper written for Sociology 868, Social Organization and Administration, Michigan State University, Fall 1969), p. 24.

Jennings accepted the position in hope of eliminating the idea that Whitehills was a problem school.

His first course of action, according to Mr. Jennings, was to determine the problems of the children and adults in the Towar Gardens community. He visited a number of homes in the area, talked to parents individually and, with the school staff, compiled a parent opinionnaire to determine attitudes concerning the school. Support was obtained from a new school superintendent who referred Mr. Jennings to Mr. Miguel Irabarren, the high school Spanish teacher in East Lansing.²⁵

Shortly thereafter, Mr. Irabarren and Mr. Jennings met to discuss the Mexican-American families in the Towar Gardens area and how best to work with these people. During the course of their conversation, they decided to work together to build a playground which was urgently needed in Towar Gardens. This project was to involve both the community and the Spanish Club. Donations of approximately \$1200, fencing, and basketball backstops were secured, as well as three lots on the north side of Lake Lansing Road.²⁶ Subsequently, some problems arose and the playground has not yet been developed.

About the same time, an article appeared in the Lansing State Journal which brought forth many of the

²⁵Ibid., pp. 27-29.

²⁶Ibid., p. 29.

old antagonisms the community held towards government officials. "Towar Gardens Called Blighted Subdivision" was the title of the article which grew out of an interview with Rev. John King.

Rev. King charged that absentee landlords had more influence with Meridian Township officials than the residents did. According to Rev. King, the township built a drainage ditch through Towar Gardens about 25 years ago and the residents were to pay about \$240 each for the construction. However, the drain was illegally constructed so no one could be assessed for it. "The township has held that against us ever since. They figure we got something for nothing."²⁷

Through the series of personal contacts, surveys, and opinionnaires, Mr. Jennings found there was a definite need "...to provide a forum to receive suggestions from parents."²⁸ This could be done, he felt, by using parent involvement meetings as a means of channeling parent concerns to the childrens' and community's advantage. A series of meetings were then held where "The Whitehills-Towar barrier, snobbery, and the "wall" were brought out into the open."²⁹ Mr. Jennings had this to say about feelings expressed to him concerning government services:

²⁷ News item in The State Journal, "Towar Gardens Called Blighted Subdivision," October 30, 1968.

²⁸ Jennings, op. cit., p. 30. ²⁹ Ibid., p. 31.

When I probed the people's perspectives about the worth of governmental services and public servants, there came to the surface a pervasive or deep-seated antagonism against the organs of government....The community felt subjected to the mass of ineffective, contesting and duplicating welfare-oriented agencies. A real division had grown up in the minds of Towar citizens between "we" (the people) and "they" (the elected and employed officials). The people complained to me of such bureaucratic impediments to their attempts at improving things as red tape, passing the buck, inflexibility, and lax enforcement of ordinances.³⁰

At one of the "neighborhood coffees" that Mr. Jennings attended in the Fall of 1968, he became actively involved in a community improvement project. Three mothers from Towar Gardens complained of a hedgerow of shrubs which limited pedestrian and automobile driver vision and was a serious safety hazard. A boy had been struck by a car at this intersection a few months before this meeting. Informed by the neighborhood mothers that they had been given the "runaround" by government officials, Mr. Jennings contacted some officials who had the shrubs cut down the next morning.³¹

This success in cutting red tape, plus a series of three articles in the Towne Courier dealing with the problems of the Towar Gardens community, lit a new fire of initiative in several neighborhood residents. Discussions were held concerning general community problems of dilapidated housing, junk cars, trash, weed infested lots, and standing water. A group of citizens spearheaded

³⁰Ibid., p. 37.

³¹Ibid., pp. 41-42.

by Rev. King and Mrs. Lloyd Ripley distributed handbills announcing a general community meeting in the basement of the Towar-Hart Baptist church--the meeting at which the Towar Action Committee was born.

About 75 Towar Gardens residents crowded into the basement of the Towar-Hart Baptist church on the evening of March 11, 1969 to discuss their dissatisfaction with Meridian Township government. According to a newspaper account of the meeting, the group,

Displaying impatience at what some described as the township board's "whitewash" of the situation,... appointed a committee to determine township responsibility and then lead the effort to force board action.³²

The committee appointed was composed of nine neighborhood residents and Mr. James Jennings.

This particular meeting opened with slides shown by Rev. King depicting "...vacant lots, junk-strewn yards and dilapidated houses."³³ Absentee landlords were blamed for many of the area's problems. The meeting became quite heated as the township officials present

...were subjected to vented hostilities and shouts from residents over their displeasure about the township's failure to enforce ordinances. They told of complaints registered at the township office over the years about which nothing had been done.³⁴

³²News item in the Meridian Towne Courier, "Towar residents air gripes," March 18, 1962.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Jennings, op. cit., pp. 43-44.

Noel Miller, township treasurer and spokesman for the board in the absence of the supervisor, said that the township would continue to do all it could in spite of legal problems involved.³⁵

The township building inspector explained the procedure he used in trying to work with land owners in cleaning up their properties. This was followed by accusations from the Towar residents that the township board never followed through with legal actions. The feelings of most people at the meeting were summed up by Rev. King who said, "Township government has every legal procedure in its hands to get this area cleaned up but the board just won't do it."³⁶

One week later, at the March 18, 1969 township board meeting, Towar Gardens residents reiterated complaints of 174 junk cars in their neighborhood, abandoned and deteriorating houses, houses which had fallen to the ground, lots covered with junk and weeds, dogs running loose, and residents who had not hooked into the sanitary sewer. The township building inspector said he had sent out seven violation notices in the past week and if no reply was received in seven days, the notices would be turned over to the township attorney

³⁵Meridian Towne Courier, loc. cit.

³⁶Ibid.

for legal action.³⁷ This legal action would consist of arresting the owner through district court for violating the nuisance ordinance after which he would be fined.

Also at this meeting, the township supervisor told the TAC that the board would cooperate in a community clean-up by donating a truck and driver to haul trash from the area, and that the trash could be dumped without charge in the Meridian Township landfill.³⁸

The clean-up day was planned by the Towar Gardens residents at an April 1 meeting at the Towar-Hart Church. The committee recruited trucks, drivers, and crews from those in attendance at the meeting, and women volunteered to serve coffee and sandwiches that day. Residents were instructed to pile junk and debris at the roadside for easier pick-up; elderly or handicapped people could notify any TAC member if they needed help. When residents asked how they could ensure that the area would remain cleaned up, they were urged to report any accumulation of junk to committee members after clean-up day.³⁹

The support that was being given to Towar residents was encouraging. Of particular value was the

³⁷News item in the Meridian Towne Courier, "Towar Gardens committee hears how township plans to help with clean-up," March 25, 1969.

³⁸News item in The State Journal, "Agreement Reached--Cleanup Planned in Towar Gardens," March 19, 1969.

³⁹News item in the Meridian Towne Courier "Towar Residents plan clean-up day," April 1, 1969.

continuing coverage of community events by a local weekly newspaper, the Towne Courier. Following is an excerpt of an editorial discussing the progress being made by the action committee:

A first step to change the appearance of the Towar Gardens area was taken this week by the residents and Meridian Township.

Township firemen burned down two houses that were unsafe and uninhabitable.

The residents banded together to organize a clean-up day next Saturday, but some property owners were getting a head start...

It is easy to see how Towar residents could unite and carry off a community project.

But just like every neighborhood, Towar has its share of slovenly pack-rats and people who use their backyards as garbage dumps...

What can be done with those residents who don't care, or who need some education on how to live with others? The Towar resident group already has a good start. This group can use its authority and some pressure to improve the area...⁴⁰

This kind of newspaper support served three vital functions. First, it provided a means of communication to all the residents in Towar Gardens, particularly those who could not attend TAC organizational meetings. Second, it improved the image of the Towar area in the eyes of the Meridian/East Lansing community by letting people know they cared about their neighborhood; and third, it compelled township government to help in the clean-up effort because of all the accusations made against the township officials.

The actual clean-up day was a complete success. Volunteers from nine outside organizations joined in

⁴⁰ Editorial in the Meridian Towne Courier, "Towar action group is getting things done," April 22, 1969.

the clean-up effort; the Meridian Township fire department burned five buildings and nine vacant lots, and the township building inspector and township attorney were among those who worked from early morning until dark.⁴¹

The more than 100 workers started the day at the Towar-Hart Church with a prayer of thanksgiving offered by Rev. King. At noon and again in the evening, workers gathered at the church and were served food that had been donated by several companies and individuals. Mrs. Jake Snell, a TAC member, said the clean-up day was to become an annual event.⁴²

According to one member of the Towar committee, many people thought the TAC would dissolve after the April clean-up campaign. But it did not. The committee remained active with two general goals they wanted to achieve: one, to get the township to enforce the zoning and nuisance ordinances, and, two, to obtain some kind of recreational facilities for the young people.

A significant forward step for Towar Gardens was taken in mid-July, 1969, when a Towar resident was appointed to the Meridian Township Board of Trustees. A vacancy occurred on the board when Robert R. Robinson, township supervisor for ten years, resigned July 1,

⁴¹News item in the Meridian Towne Courier, "Towar clean-up a success," April 22, 1969.

⁴²Ibid.

1969. Shortly thereafter, an editorial appeared in the Towne Courier suggesting that the board seriously consider a person from Towar Gardens to fill the unexpired term of John Roetman who was appointed the new supervisor.⁴³ Mr. William Armstrong, a Towar resident, was appointed to the board July 15th. Speaking on his new appointment, Mr. Armstrong said,

I want to see the people here[in Towar Gardens] on a so-called equal basis with the rest of the township--to see the area up-graded and cleaned up from the people's point of view.

I hope to get the board to devote a fair percentage of their time to Towar Gardens....I know we're not the only fish in the pond; but if I can get them to spend a 10th of 1 per cent of their time on the area, I'm sure we can get things accomplished.⁴⁴

The appointment of a trustee from Towar Gardens did not end the controversy between Towar residents and township officials, however.

About three weeks after Mr. Armstrong was appointed to the Township Board, the township building inspector was interviewed and said that much had been done in enforcing the zoning and nuisance ordinances in the Towar Gardens area, but not everyone in the area was cooperating.

One guy has said he was here before the zoning ordinance so he doesn't have to obey it...I will probably have to serve him with a violation.

We've worked with the people here and have gone along with them to the point where we will

⁴³Editorial in the Meridian Towne Courier, "A Trustee from Towar Gardens?" July 22, 1969.

⁴⁴News item in the Meridian Towne Courier, "New trustee plans Towar action," July 22, 1969.

take legal action to get them to clean up their property...

Anyone who can say the committee and township haven't been working together is out of their head...⁴⁵

People were complaining, though.

Mrs. Jake Snell, a member of TAC, said there are nine people in the area who have refused to do anything about cleaning up their property, and although their names have been turned in to the township, no action has been taken against them.⁴⁶

A meeting of township officials with District Judge William Reed on August 25, 1969, was held to determine procedures for enforcing the ordinances. A report was made at the September 2nd township board meeting by the township attorney that violators of ordinances controlling public nuisances will find new "teeth" applied to laws they have been ignoring.⁴⁷

Mr. Swift [the township attorney] said this is not a move to generate revenue, [but] rather to motivate persons who have made no attempt to comply with ordinances which have been on the books for 5 years.⁴⁸

This statement appeared to be an admission by the township's attorney that these laws had not, indeed, been enforced.

The most dramatic portrayal of the Towar Action Committee's effectiveness in dealing with the township

⁴⁵ News item in The State Journal, "Towar Subdivision Cleanup Proceeding," August 8, 1969.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

government involved the condemning of a house in Towar Gardens.

In May 1969, Mr. Robert Ruiz bought a house at 6045 Hardy Street from the All Star Realty Company. He paid \$7,700 for the house with a \$200 allowance for repairs that would bring it up to Meridian Township code standards. When a carpenter examined the house and said that the necessary repairs could not be made for \$200, Mr. Ruiz demanded his money back. The real estate company refused to refund his money, but instead made some repairs to the house so the township building inspector would remove the "uninhabitable" tag. After the repairs were made, Mr. Ruiz still maintained that the house was unsatisfactory; however, the "uninhabitable" tag was removed by the building inspector.⁴⁹

The TAC was disturbed with the removal of the tag. One member said, "If this house was in any other subdivision of the township, it would never be okayed."⁵⁰ A second member said, "If the township accepts this house as "habitable," our chances of cleaning up Towar are absolutely nil..."⁵¹

In retaliation the TAC placed an "open house" sign on the house stating:

⁴⁹News item in the Meridian Towne Courier, "Towar committee arranges 'open house' for citizens to view living conditions," September 30, 1969.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Ibid.

the township has approved this place as fit to live in. Think! Would you like to live in a city with this kind of housing?⁵²

The sign gave a phone number for anyone wishing to see the house to call. The allusion to "city" on the sign was especially embarrassing to township officials at that time since a November cityhood vote was being promoted for Meridian.

After about one week of the open house, the township building inspector condemned the house as unsafe for human occupancy.⁵³ As a result of this action the real estate agency terminated the contract with Mr. Ruiz and returned a portion of the down payment to him. The realtor then sold the house to a Lansing carpenter who spent between \$600 and \$700 to repair the house with the intent to sell it.⁵⁴

The Ruiz house incident, which ended to the satisfaction of everyone concerned, demonstrated the effectiveness of "Towar power," a phrase coined by Mr. Jennings' wife in keeping with the popular vernacular of the times. The action committee gained new stature for itself in the eyes of both Towar residents and the rest of the Meridian/East Lansing community.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ News item in Meridian Towne Courier, "Towar Gardens house condemned," October 7, 1969.

⁵⁴ News item in the Meridian Towne Courier, "Towar house for sale once more: residents and officials satisfied," January 6, 1970.

Their successes did not lead to complacency on the part of the action committee, however. Complaints continued to be brought before the township board as a result of continued ordinance violations. The result of these complaints were continuing violation notices and inspections of the Towar Gardens area by the township building department. As of this time, however, persons refusing to comply with the ordinances despite numerous official warnings have not yet been prosecuted, much to the dismay of some action committee members who claim that violations will continue to occur so long as it is apparent that the township is "bluffing" with its threats of prosecution. What is needed, according to some Towar residents, are a few court cases to show that the township government really means business. Without prosecution of flagrant violators, the ordinances will never voluntarily be complied with by people who have become accustomed to a certain life-style after decades of living in a particular neighborhood environment.

Beyond the effort to get their neighborhood cleaned up, the second (but not secondary) goal of the Towar Action Committee has been, and continues to be, the providing of recreational facilities for the community's young people.

As mentioned previously, one of the first ideas for a Towar Gardens community project involved a playground sponsored by the Spanish Club at East Lansing High School. However, the project got a slow start, partly because of a heart attack and hospitalization

of one of its prime supporters, Mr. Irabarren, and partly because of some doubts on the part of TAC members as to the desirability of its location.

The playground was first proposed in the Fall of 1968 as a result of discussions between Mr. Jennings and Mr. Irabarren concerning how to best work with the Mexican-American families in Towar Gardens.⁵⁵ Although space for the playground was donated by an East Lansing developer, it was leased to the community for a period of only three years. Residents from Towar were reluctant to develop a playground with a potential for being so short-lived. Also, the desirability of the location was questioned because the site was at the southern extremity of the Towar community and afforded too long a walk for many of the children; the location was also questioned because of the safety aspect, it being contiguous to Lake Lansing Road, a major arterial, where small children could wander into the roadway. Although the plans for developing this playground were not abandoned, more viable alternatives were sought by the community.

Recreational activities for young children in the Towar area have been provided for about three years by members of SCOPE, a group of college students connected with the Volunteer Bureau at Michigan State University. These activities are held at the community center

⁵⁵Jennings, op. cit., p. 29.

building adjacent to, and owned by, the Towar-Hart Baptist Church. Maintenance of the building and utilities are paid for by the Volunteer Bureau. The center is open three days a week after school and Saturday afternoons, and is very popular with the neighborhood youngsters. However, the facilities must be limited to those under 13 years of age because the space is not adequate to accommodate all age groups. Activities for teenagers in the community are limited to those provided in the East Lansing school programs and, as will be examined in the next chapter, this presented numerous problems for Towar Gardens teenagers.

An appeal was made by the Towar Action Committee at the July 1, 1969 meeting of the township board for recreation facilities in Towar Gardens. The board was told that action committee members had spoken to East Lansing school officials about developing either of two school-owned vacant properties in Towar Gardens for recreational facilities. School officials, however, did not react favorably to the suggestion, and said that recreation was the township's concern. When questioned by a TAC member about the possibility of the township acquiring a recreation site in Towar Gardens, the board stressed that money for land acquisition was not available. After stating that an immediate solution by the township was not possible, the board

reacted favorably to a suggestion by John Roetman, who was to become the new supervisor, that the Towar area be checked for possible recreation sites, and that the East Lansing Board of Education be contacted to determine if an interim recreation program could be developed.⁵⁶

A letter was written to the East Lansing Board of Education by John Roetman, shortly after he became township supervisor, asking if the board would be willing to discuss the possibility of using some school-owned land in Towar Gardens.⁵⁷ A meeting between these two groups did not occur until October 6, 1969, but the action committee did not wait that long in trying to get a commitment from the East Lansing school board.

The Towar Action Committee met with the East Lansing Board of Education September 17, 1969 at the community center building to discuss their recreation needs. The need for indoor recreation facilities as well as a playground was cited by one TAC member; this need was especially great for teenage activities. Residents requested the use of the old Towar School, which was being used as a warehouse, for teenage

⁵⁶ News item in the Meridian Towne Courier, "Towar Committee seeks recreation site," July 15, 1969.

⁵⁷ News item in the Meridian Towne Courier, "Use of school land for Towar recreation to be considered by East Lansing board," July 22, 1969.

recreation, but board members said there was no place else to store the school materials. The point was also brought out at this meeting that the community center would be destroyed in a few years to make room for a new church parsonage, thereby eliminating indoor recreation for all age groups in the Towar area. No commitments were made by the school board at this meeting, but the board promised to give an answer at their October 13th board meeting.⁵⁸

Meanwhile, a meeting between the Meridian Township board and the East Lansing Board of Education was called for October 6th to discuss the Towar recreation needs. The needs for both indoor and outdoor facilities were agreed upon and several alternatives were suggested to meet the needs. It was decided that a committee should be established comprised of two East Lansing representatives, two township representatives, and at least two Towar area residents which would prepare a request for federal recreation funds from the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO). One possible use suggested for OEO funds was for leasing the Towar school building; the school district could then use the lease monies for constructing a new warehouse. One school board member reported that local OEO officials had indicated that

⁵⁸ News item in the Meridian Towne Courier, "Old School to be considered for use as Towar youth center," September 23, 1969.

funds might be available to cover leasing a building and the initial staffing of a community action center.⁵⁹

The following evening, October 7th, the Meridian Township board appointed the planning director and the new member of the board from Towar Gardens to represent the township on the committee to secure funds from OEO. The planning director delegated his position to the writer of this paper who was on the planning department staff. Also at this board meeting, the planning director said that planners would be happy to meet with the Towar Action Committee to discuss future recreation plans for the area.

The first meeting of the ad hoc group appointed to investigate OEO funding was held October 26, 1969 at the East Lansing High School. In addition to the township and school representatives, there were five members of the TAC and one member of SCOPE present. It was decided by the Towar representative that an indoor recreational facility was the first priority item to consider. One member of the Towar committee said the Towar Gardens school would be a perfect indoor recreation site because of ample space and a central location in the community. The question arose, as it had previously, of how much money the township had available for recreation and the answer, as always, was noncommittal.

⁵⁹News item in The State Journal, "Center Funding Action Eyed," October 7, 1969.

One school official said that perhaps one room of the school might be made available to the community, subject to approval by the school board. The November meeting with OEO was then discussed. It was stressed by TAC members that they did not want OEO to run the program, but to just provide the money for the community and SCOPE volunteers to run their own program.

A member of the school board suggested that a more formal board be set up to deal with OEO. It was decided after some discussion that this Board of Directors would be composed of four members from the Towar Action Committee, one member from Meridian Township, and one member from the East Lansing public schools. This board would be responsible for the actual operation of the recreation center, if and when such a center was obtained.

The second meeting of the ad hoc recreation committee was held November 3rd. Since the previous meeting Mrs. Snell, an action committee member, had spoken to OEO representatives about possible funding for a teenage center. According to that discussion, OEO would provide materials to supply a center, but would not supply money to run a program. It was decided to invite an OEO representative to the next committee meeting to determine exactly what could be done.

A representative from OEO was present November 12th at the third meeting of the ad hoc recreation committee. The committee was told that OEO could provide

up to \$1,500 for supplies through June 1970 when an additional commitment could be made if warranted. But OEO could not provide a building or any staff for a recreation program; that would remain the responsibility of the East Lansing schools and Meridian Township.

Three months elapsed before indoor recreation facilities were obtained for Towar teenagers. Meanwhile, the action committee turned its attention to another recreational facility it wanted for the winter months-- an ice skating rink.

Mrs. Snell asked about the possibility of an ice rink at several township board meetings and was told such an attempt would be made. However, the township officials expressed doubts about the availability of water for an ice skating rink since the Towar Gardens area is not served with water, and the nearest available water was from the Towar school well which school officials had given the township permission to use. Repeated suggestions from Towar residents that a fire department tank truck be used to flood a rink were rejected by township officials without any reasons being given why this could not be done. There was precedent for this action, according to Mrs. Snell, who said that the township fire department had built a rink in Towar Gardens several years ago. When an attempt was finally made to get water from the school to the rink everyone's suspicions were confirmed; it couldn't be done. Better luck (or cooperation) was hoped for

next year when water from the township system would be available.

Since outdoor recreation in the form of an ice skating rink was doomed to failure, attention was again focused on indoor recreational facilities in the Towar Gardens school. After considerable procrastination on the part of East Lansing school officials, they finally consented to allow the Towar community the use of one room in the Towar school.⁶⁰

Towar teenagers wasted no time in utilizing their new recreational facility. At an organizational meeting February 4, 1970--which was attended by over thirty teenagers, several TAC members and this writer--the teenagers selected a council and voted for leaders to represent them in their recreational program. In an atmosphere of elation over their new "drop-in center," the teens planned a get-acquainted dance and talked about ways of publicizing the center to all Towar Gardens residents. At last they had a center to call their own.

The acquisition of a room in the Towar school for recreational activities, however, did not mean that Towar residents were satisfied with the kind of

⁶⁰At the September 17, 1969 meeting between East Lansing School officials and Towar residents, an answer to the Towar school question was promised for the October 13th school board meeting; however, this was not done, and the school officials did not make their decision until February 1970.

treatment they were getting from government officials. Even the evening of the teen center opening was marred by complaints of how code enforcement was being handled in the Towar Gardens area. According to one Towar resident, names of people complaining to the township about ordinance violations were being given to persons the complaints involved. Towar Action Committee members had been promised by the township board that this would never be done. Because of these careless actions, long time friendships between Towar residents were jeopardized and the effectiveness of the TAC was possibly diminished. A meeting between the township board and the action committee to discuss this and other problems was suggested by a TAC member to a township official; however, such a meeting has not, to date, taken place. The particular grievance of using names of "informers" was remedied by the township, but as usual nothing was done to initiate a meeting between government officials and Towar residents at which the entire spectrum of community needs--and the government's ability to solve them--could be rationally discussed.

Summary

It can be seen from the events described in this chapter that the needs of the Towar Gardens community have been neglected for many years, and only through a strong neighborhood committee have some of these needs been met in recent months.

The most serious problems in Towar Gardens have been the lack of enforcement of local ordinances, the lack of adequate recreational facilities, and a lack of communication and understanding between government officials, particularly Meridian Township officials, and residents of the Towar area. This distrust and suspicion of each other's motives did not happen overnight, but grew out of antagonisms beginning as early as the 1930's. The enactment of a zoning ordinance and a nuisance ordinance were supported by the people of Towar Gardens as a means of getting their neighborhood cleaned up. The fact that the ordinances were not enforced anywhere in the township upholds the contention of township officials that the Towar Gardens area was not discriminated against; however, the important point to remember is that Towar Gardens needed strong code enforcement more than other areas of the Township, the reasons for this being explored in a subsequent chapter of this report.

A similar situation existed in respect to recreational facilities for Towar Gardens. There was no area in Meridian which was provided with these facilities. As one government official remarked to this writer, "It's true, we haven't done much for them (Towar Gardens), but then we haven't done much for anybody in the township." The reason for this was, of course, that

Meridian Township did not have much money with a five mill taxing limitation. (Before 1959 the limit was one mill). A small amount of funds were given annually to the school districts in the township, but aside from this, no money was available for recreation.

The crux of the problem, again, referred back to the communication gap between township officials and Towar residents; the township officials did not understand, and were not willing to explore, the special needs of the Towar community, and Towar residents did not really understand the inability of the township to provide them with all the services they needed. The people in Towar Gardens were not really a part of the governmental decision-making process until one of their neighbors was appointed to the township board, and this has not yet proven to be a panacea because the new board member does not have the complete confidence of either the Towar community or the other members of the board.

It has been said that in order for local neighborhood associations, such as the Towar Action Committee, to contribute to community planning and decision-making, three factors must be present: motivation, organizational structure, and communication. The action committee has proven through the changes it has brought about in the community that its motivation and organizational

structure was strong; however, it still has not had an effective role in the formulation of plans by elected or appointed government officials. This is due to a lack of communication between township officials and action committee members which should have been initiated by the government officials.

The special needs of the Towar Gardens area have been mentioned several times. What are these special needs and how did they evolve? The answer to this question must be examined in the historical context of the evolution of the community itself. The next chapter will explore the history of Towar Gardens as well as its present characteristics. This examination of existing problems will set the framework for how they could be corrected through a governmental commitment of cooperation and support.

CHAPTER II

TOWAR GARDENS IN PERSPECTIVE--ITS HISTORY AND CHARACTERISTICS

The relationship between government officials and Towar Gardens residents has been examined in a historical perspective in the previous chapter; however, this has left several questions unanswered. Why were the problems in Towar Gardens different than those in other areas of Meridian Township? What were these problems? How did they evolve? What should have been done by township officials, and what can be done today? The answer to the last question will be explored in another part of this report, while the remaining questions will be the subject of the following discussion.

An exploration of the social, economic, and physical characteristics of Towar Gardens today is an important part of understanding its present and future needs. How these characteristics evolved over time is also important, since this historical perspective of how problems evolved can help in determining how they can be prevented in the future.

Early Settlement

Although the history of the Towar Gardens area as a distinct neighborhood in Meridian Township did not begin until it was platted in the 1920's, it is interesting to note some of the early settlers in this area.

The original land entries in section 6 (in which Towar Gardens is located) of Meridian Township were by Henry Cleveland on April 3, 1837, and Peter G. Miller in 1847.¹ Reuben K. Hardy, father of the Hardy brothers who owned a large resort on Pine Lake (now Lake Lansing) settled in section 6 about 1857.² It is possible that Hardy Avenue, located in Harts Subdivision, was named for this longtime resident of the area.

G. M. Towar located in section 6 in 1853.³ Whether or not Towar Gardens received its name from this man or his family is unknown for certain; however, in a biographical sketch of James De Loss Towar in a book he authored concerning the history of the City of East Lansing, it states that James Towar "was born September 26, 1863, on the Towar Farm, one mile north of the City of East Lansing."⁴ Since one of the plats

¹Samuel W. Durant, History of Ingham and Eaton Counties Michigan (Philadelphia: D. W. Ensign & Co., 1880), p. 277.

²Ibid., p. 287.

³Ibid., p. 279.

⁴James Towar, "History of the City of East Lansing" (East Lansing, Michigan: written for the East Lansing Public Library, 1933), (mimeographed).

in the Towar Gardens area is Supervisor's Plat of Towar Farms, it is probable that the Towar Gardens community received its name from the long-time resident of the G. M. and James D. Towar families.

Since much of the recent criticism in Towar Gardens has been directed towards absentee landlords, it is interesting to note that in 1914 over 476 acres in section 6 of Meridian Township, including all the land now in the Towar Gardens area, was not owner occupied. At that time, there were only five houses in the square mile section, two of which were in the area known today as Towar Gardens.⁵

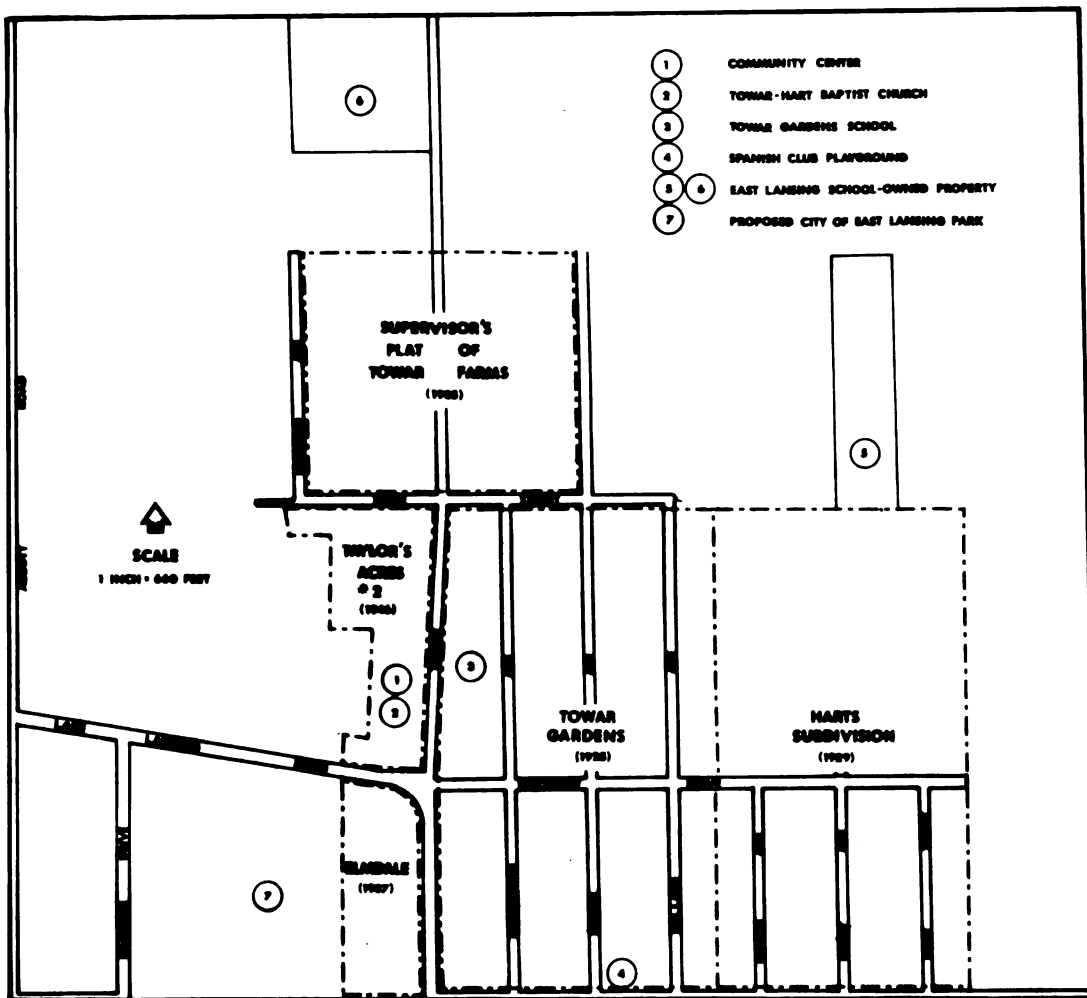
First Platted Subdivisions

The first platted subdivision in section 6, Meridian Township, was Towar Gardens in 1925, which was followed in succession by Harts Subdivision (1935), Supervisor's Plat of Towar Farms (1935), Elmdale (1937), and Taylor's Acres Number 2 (1946) (see Figure 2 for locations). Two other subdivisions in section 6 of Meridian Township are not considered a part of the Towar Gardens area since they are geographically separated from the aforementioned subdivisions which are all contiguous, and they do not have the problems commonly associated with the Towar Gardens community.

⁵Chadwick Farm Atlas of Ingham County Michigan (Map), Compiled and published by C. W. Chadwick, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1914.

Figure 2

PLATTED SUBDIVISIONS IN THE TOWAR GARDENS AREA INCLUDING IMPORTANT LANDMARKS



Building projects were started in Towar Gardens shortly after it was platted. The second house in the area was built in 1925 by Milton Rulison, whose daughter (Mrs. Jake Snell) is currently chairman of the Towar Action Committee. Mr. Rulison was a well-driller and typified the blue-collar workers who were attracted to the Towar Gardens area. It is impossible to determine precisely the early rate of growth in Towar Gardens since many of the early homes have subsequently been removed or destroyed. However, some indication of growth rates can be determined from voter registration records and census data.

Of the 324 housing units existing in Towar Gardens (census tract) in 1960, 83 (26 per cent) were built between 1950 and March 1960, 146 (45 per cent) were built between 1940 and 1949, and 95 (29 per cent) were built before 1940.⁶ Of the 95 structures built before 1940, many were "temporary" shelters hastily constructed shortly after the Great Depression struck. Between 1925 and 1935, the largest number of voters from Towar Gardens to register in any single year was 21 in 1930.⁷ This may indicate only that the dire economic conditions spurred

⁶United States Bureau of the Census, U.S. Census of Population and Housing: 1960 Census Tracts (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1962), Table H-1.

⁷Registration Book - Men and Women Electors (Meridian Township, Ingham County, Precinct No. 2, State of Michigan).

additional voter participation, but it probably signaled a rapid influx of people into the area because of inexpensive lots in the newly platted subdivision. The makeshift housing that was constructed was reflected in zoning ordinance violation notices in the early 1950's which cited "numerous basement houses," trailers, and "shacks" in the Towar Gardens area.⁸

When Taylor's Acres Number 2 was platted north of Lake Lansing Road and west of Towar Avenue in 1946, a community park approximately one acre in size was deeded to the Towar Gardens community. A community center building was constructed on the site and was used for many teen-age dances sponsored by Mrs. Snell.⁹ The park and community center building were sold in 1961 to the Towar-Hart Baptist Church directly to the south of it. This action was taken, according to Mrs. Snell, because the community could not supply the manpower to run a recreational program, and governmental funds were not available to hire any recreation personnel.

The children in Towar Gardens first attended the Carl school on the northwest corner of Lake Lansing Road and M-78. This two room school, located in the Meridian Number 7 district, was used for kindergarten through

⁸Meridian Township Board, Minutes (Haslett, Michigan: October 17, 1950 and July 7, 1951).

⁹Statement by Mrs. Jake Snell, personal interview, January 31, 1970.

eighth grade, after which the students attended Haslett High School. The Carl school soon was outgrown, and in 1939 the Towar Gardens school was built north of Birchrow Drive between Towar and Rutherford Avenue. The Towar Gardens school accommodated grades one through six; however, when the Haslett High School and Junior High School became overcrowded, the older students were transferred to the Otto Junior High and Eastern Senior High schools in Lansing.¹⁰

By 1950, the Towar Gardens school was becoming overcrowded so the William Donley elementary school was built in 1951 at the southeast corner of Hagadorn and Lake Lansing Roads. Kindergarten children as well as grades three through six attended the Donley school, while grades one and two were retained at the Towar Gardens school.¹¹

The portion of Meridian Number 7 school district north of Lake Lansing Road and east of Hagadorn Road was consolidated with the East Lansing school district in 1960. (Other portions of the Meridian Number 7 district became part of the East Lansing district when their respective land areas were annexed to the City of East Lansing.) Junior and Senior high students then

¹⁰Statement by Mrs. Jake Snell, personal interview, March 2, 1970.

¹¹Ibid.

changed to these East Lansing school facilities. In 1962 the first and second grades at the Towar Gardens school were sent to Donley school and the Towar Gardens school was used for mentally retarded trainables until 1967 when it was converted into a warehouse. The Whitehills elementary school was built in 1963 to accommodate the growing population of the Whitehills Estates area, as well as to relieve crowded conditions at the Donley school. The children from Towar Gardens were then separated into the two elementary school districts; about one-half continued at the Donley school, while the others went to the new Whitehills school.¹²

Later in this chapter, the social problems of Towar Gardens children attending the East Lansing schools will be explored. Some Towar Gardens parents have charged that many of these problems have resulted from the numerous changes the students have had to make from school to school. One resident claimed that her daughter in the fourth grade has already attended three different schools.¹³ This made it difficult, not only for the children in establishing an identity, but also for the parents who found it difficult to become active in school activities such as the PTA.

The evolution of the Towar Gardens area over the past 45 years has resulted in a unique community, with

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.

characteristics and problems much unlike those of surrounding neighborhoods, Meridian Township, or East Lansing.

Population Characteristics

Much of the information concerning the present characteristics of Towar Gardens must be inferred from 1960 U.S. Census data, portions of which have been updated in the 1965 Tri-County Home Interview Survey. Unfortunately, the census tract in which Towars Gardens is located also contains three subdivisions with characteristics unlike those of Towar Gardens. (Again, it should be mentioned that the use of the term "Towar Gardens" includes four other platted subdivisions normally considered part of the Towar Gardens area.) These other subdivisions include Skyline Hills, Taylor's Acres Number 1, and West Oaks. The homes in these subdivisions are considerably more expensive than most of those found in Towar Gardens and it can be assumed that population characteristics such as median family income, education, and type of employment would also differ. However, presently about 74 per cent of the dwellings in the tract (MT-45) are in the Towar Gardens area; in 1960 this figure was probably closer to 80 per cent. It should be remembered, then, that when statistics are cited for Towar Gardens, they are census tract figures

unless otherwise noted, and that conditions in Towar Gardens were somewhat worse than statistics indicate.

In 1960 Towar Gardens had slightly more males than females, a condition also existing in Meridian Township as a whole. However, the population in Towar was unique in its age structure. The median age was 19.4 years for males and 19.8 years for females, compared to 25.5 and 26.7 years, respectively, in the township.¹⁴ The reason for this low median age was the large number of dependent children, as reflected in the large average household size, which will be discussed further under housing.

Racially, Towar Gardens was almost entirely white, as was Meridian Township. In 1960, one single non-white male lived in Towar Gardens (who, incidentally, was not a Negro).¹⁵ This condition has changed only slightly; today there is one Negro family living in Towar Gardens. The 1965 Tri-County Home Interview Survey reported that, in that year, 11 per cent of Towar Gardens population, or approximately 175 persons were non-white.¹⁶ These were primarily Mexican-Americans

¹⁴U.S. Bureau of the Census, op. cit., p. 31.

¹⁵Ibid., Tables P-1 and P-2.

¹⁶Meridian Charter Township Planning Department, Preliminary Report: Meridian Charter Township Population Study (unpublished report, Technical Memorandum #1, Haslett, Michigan, September 1968).

(which are not classified non-white by the U.S. Census Bureau) which, in addition to living in the Towar Gardens area, are also located in the Lake Lansing Area of Meridian Township.

There is a much higher percentage of blue collar and service workers in Towar Gardens (49.5 per cent and 16.7 per cent, respectively) than in Meridian Township as a whole (25.4 per cent and 10.7 per cent).¹⁷ Most of the blue collar workers, in addition, are employed in manufacturing.¹⁸ This has been a primary reason for the cyclical high unemployment rate in Towar Gardens since the industries in the Lansing area, being primarily automobile oriented, are cyclical themselves in respect to national economic trends. The significance of this factor can be seen from a 9.2 per cent unemployment rate in 1960 for Towar Gardens, compared to a 4.0 per cent rate for Meridian Township.¹⁹

The high percentage of blue-collar workers and unemployment also contributed to a lower median family income for Towar residents. In 1960 the median family income for Towar Gardens was \$5,587 compared to \$7,566 for all Meridian Township residents. However, it is interesting to note that between 1960 and 1965, Towar

¹⁷Meridian Charter Township Planning Department, Preliminary Report: Meridian Charter Township Economic Base Study (unpublished report, Technical Memorandum #2, Haslett, Michigan, November 1968), Table 5.

¹⁸Ibid., Table 7.

¹⁹Ibid., Table 4.

Gardens had the second largest median family income percentage increase (35.4 per cent) of the six census tracts in Meridian Township, which meant that Towar Gardens was no longer the lowest income area in the township.²⁰ There could be several reasons for this higher than average rise in Towar Gardens income (Meridian Township's median family income rose only 20.7 per cent between 1960 and 1965), one of them being that new housing in Skyline Hills brought more higher-income families into the census tract, and a second being that perhaps lower unemployment rates prevailed in the automobile industry, thereby raising the incomes of the large percentage of Towar Gardens blue collar workers.

Closely allied to the occupational characteristics of a given area is the educational achievement of its residents. Towar Gardens is no exception to this general rule. In 1960 the median number of school years completed for Towar residents was 9.0, compared to 12.3 years for all Meridian Township residents, 11.9 years for Lansing residents, and 10.7 years for Michigan residents.²¹ The significance of this fact will be discussed later in this chapter with the social characteristics and problems of the Towar area.

²⁰Meridian Charter Township Population Study, op. cit., Table 11.

²¹Ibid., p. 10 and Table 9.

One of the more significant problems of Towar Gardens is the housing stock and the overcrowded conditions in some of them. This overcrowding is not merely a matter of houses being too small, but is also due to large families. The household size in Towar Gardens is quite high, reflecting the high proportion of its population in the under-14 age group. In 1960 the average household size in Towar Gardens was 4.26, compared to 3.66 in Meridian Township. By 1965, the figure for Towar Gardens increased 0.07 to 4.33 persons per household while the township figure increased only 0.01 to 3.67 persons per household.²² The high percentage of Towar Gardens population under the age of 14 in 1960 (39.8 per cent versus 34.4 per cent for Meridian township) had ramifications in the late 1960's when recreation facilities were badly needed for the many teenagers in the Towar area.

The land uses in Towar Gardens are almost entirely residential. Commercial development is limited to two small grocery stores and a run-down gasoline service station. The developed residential lots range in size from 9,500 square feet in Towar Gardens to over 40,000 square feet in Supervisor's Plat of Towar Farms.²³ The

²²Ibid., Table 12.

²³Meridian Charter Township Planning Department, Meridian Charter Township Existing Land Use Study, Preliminary Report (unpublished report, Technical Memorandum #3, Haslett, Michigan, December 1968), p. 28.

9,500 square foot lot size in Towar Gardens is misleading when discussing lot sizes, however, since most homeowners own at least two or three contiguous lots, and in some cases there is only one house on six or seven contiguous lots.

Housing and Environment

The condition of housing in Towar Gardens is something which cannot be explained through statistics alone. Although the percentage of dilapidated housing is considerably higher than the percentage for Meridian Township (23 per cent versus 5 per cent in 1960),²⁴ there is a wide variety of housing types ranging from very small inadequate dwellings to elaborate new structures. The idea that a person might have before seeing the area that Towar Gardens is a "slum" is dispelled quickly upon investigating the number of new or newly remodeled homes. This condition gives added emphasis to the claim made by many people living in Towar Gardens that they like living there, and even though they could afford to live elsewhere, they choose to remain in Towar Gardens.

The condition of housing in Towar Gardens should not be de-emphasized as a problem, however, even though many excellent dwellings do exist. According to recent data gathered for a housing study in Meridian Township, of a total of 264 dwelling units in Towar Gardens in

²⁴Ibid., p. 29.

1969, 73 were classified as fair (deteriorating) and 68 were classified as poor (dilapidated).²⁵ Since American Public Health Association criteria were used in evaluating housing conditions instead of U.S. Bureau of the Census criteria, it is not possible to draw any accurate conclusions on housing condition trends in Towar Gardens; however, from talking with neighborhood residents and township officials, the general concensus is that the area is improving, but slowly.

According to the aforementioned housing study of Meridian Township, many of the blighting influences in Towar Gardens are not housing oriented, but are non-residential nuisances. For example, when the survey was taken in July 1969 there were found 146 cases of non-residential nuisances such as miscellaneous large rubble in yards, junk automobiles, lumber to be racked, or a dilapidated shed or accessory building. Of this total number, 51 were junked automobiles.²⁶ This showed considerable improvement over the 174 junked automobiles reported in the Towar area before the April 1969 clean-up campaign, but it also showed that much remained to be done in the neighborhood before it was brought up to acceptable community standards. The Meridian housing study utilized a penalty point rating system in showing

²⁵Unpublished data on file with the Meridian Township Planning Department.

²⁶Ibid.

how neighborhoods could be improved by either eliminating nuisances or by removing environmental deficiencies. According to the study, Towar Gardens had few environmental deficiencies other than unpaved streets; however, the following comments were made concerning the large number of nuisance factors:

Figure 12 [a map]...illustrates the possible reduction of blight provided that suitable programs of nuisance abatement are undertaken. It is important to realize that all incidents of such nuisances are violations of either the Township Building Code or the Township Nuisance Ordinance and may be eliminated through stricter enforcement of the same...Thus, the potential for upgrading this area is dependent upon the addition of a few minor im-²⁷provements and strict code enforcement practices.

These statements in the Meridian Township housing study reiterate a point which Towar Gardens residents have been proclaiming for years, i.e., that their neighborhood could never hope to be upgraded without the help of township officials in enforcing the zoning and nuisance ordinances. It should be mentioned that shortly after the Meridian planning department undertook its housing study of Towar Gardens, a similar study was undertaken by the Ingham County Health Department as part of its Project ECHO (Evidence of Community Health Organization) housing and environment study, and their preliminary data corresponded very closely with Meridian

²⁷Meridian Charter Township Planning Commission, Housing & Environment: A Study of Structural Obsolescence and Environmental Blight in Meridian Charter Township (unpublished report, Haslett, Michigan, November 1969), pp. 23-27.

Township findings, thereby strengthening the conclusions of the township study.

One of the most frequent complaints of Towar residents has concerned the condition of renter occupied homes in their neighborhood, and the reluctance of absentee landlords to do anything about cleaning up their properties. There are several houses owned and rented by absentee landlords, and an even greater number of vacant lots are owned by persons not residing in Towar Gardens; however, the number of owner occupied units is high for an area with so many sub-standard structures. According to 1960 U.S. Census data, 82 per cent of the dwellings in the Towar Gardens tract were owner occupied.²⁸ Of course, this percentage would be somewhat lower in the Towar Gardens area itself since few homes outside of Towar in this census tract are renter occupied, but the fact remains that the rate of home ownership in Towar Gardens is high compared to a 73.2 per cent figure for all Meridian Township in 1960.²⁹

The fact that there were only 51 renter occupied units in Towar Gardens in 1960, and that there were 171 deteriorating or dilapidated structures disputes the contention made by Towar residents that most of the

²⁸U.S. Bureau of the Census, op. cit., p. 49.

²⁹Meridian Charter Township Population Study, op. cit., Table 8.

substandard housing in their neighborhood is renter-occupied. Although the current status of this situation cannot be precisely determined, some generalizations can be made from recent ordinance violations in the Towar area. According to Meridian Township building department records, in December 1969 thirty violation notices were issued in the Towar Gardens area, of which 6 were sent to absentee landlords.³⁰ If violators have been treated equally, this would seem to indicate that nuisance factors in the Towar area are no more prevalent, percentage wise, in renter occupied units than in owner occupied units.

It is also interesting to note that landlords of many dwellings and vacant lots in Towar Gardens are Towar residents themselves. At least four Towar residents own five or more parcels of property (with or without dwellings) in Towar Gardens, and one resident owns ten such pieces of property.³¹

One very notable exception to the prevalence of Towar landlords and multiple-property owners is an East Lansing land developer, Albert White, who owns, or whose company owns, approximately 65 parcels of land in the Towar Gardens area. It was Mr. White who

³⁰Meridian Township Building Department records.

³¹Data from Meridian Township Assessing Department records.

leased three lots at the corner of Porter Road and Lake Lansing Road to the community to use as a playground for three years. Some of their future plans for the Towar Gardens area were discussed with Mr. George White of the Whitehills Development Company.

Most of the Whites' property in Towar Gardens is north of Lake Lansing Road. According to Mr. (George) White, they have no immediate plans for these properties; however, their long-range plans are to develop this area at a higher density than single family if it could be re-zoned. Also, they would like to develop some professional office uses along Lake Lansing Road which, in Mr. White's thinking, would become much more heavily traveled if the proposed J. L. Hudson shopping center is constructed northwest of Towar Gardens in East Lansing.³²

When questioned about the interior lots their company has purchased, Mr. White said that perhaps entire blocks could be redeveloped (saving the good houses) if better financing were available in the future. He also mentioned the fact that the availability of utilities, specifically water when it is available in Towar Gardens, will have a great deal of significance in the upgrading of the area through private development and redevelopment. When reminiscing about his

³²Statement by George White, personal interview, February 23, 1970.

childhood in the Marble area of East Lansing (then in Meridian Township), Mr. White discussed the similarities he saw between that area in the 1930's and Towar Gardens today. He said that he expected the Towar area to be upgraded much in the same way as the Marble area: through the provision of public utilities, and through the urbanization of surrounding areas with good-quality housing. This will be occurring in the Towar area with a joint development venture of Duane Bone Builders, Incorporated, and Whitehills Development Corporation. This new development, Carriage Hill Estates, will consist of a mixture of residential densities--medium density multiple units, townhouses, and single-family units--between Towar Gardens and Skyline Hills to the east. Mr. White also mentioned the location of Towar Gardens in the East Lansing school district as a positive factor in its redevelopment potential.³³ Whether its location in the East Lansing school district is beneficial or detrimental to the Towar Gardens area will be among those issues discussed next under social problems.

Social Problems

The social problems evident in the Towar Gardens area can be broken down into two major classifications: (1) those affecting adults, and (2) those affecting the

³³Ibid.

school children. Of the two types of problems, those affecting the school-age population appear to be much more serious, although the impact of these problems on the adult population should not be minimized.

The residents of Towar Gardens are not poor. Thirty-eight families in Towar Gardens receive some kind of public assistance, which is many fewer than in the past.³⁴ The relatively high median family income of the area has been mentioned previously, and the high percentage increase in family income between 1960 and 1965 shows that conditions are definitely improving in the area. A public health nurse from the Ingham County Health Department stated that while health needs are still widespread in the area, there has been great improvement in recent years.³⁵ Similarly, the Ingham County Sheriff said,

We no longer consider Towar Gardens a problem area. There are no more problems there than in any other area.

The people living there are not the element creating crime in surrounding areas either.... Some people think so, but it isn't true. These crimes do not relate back to Towar Gardens.³⁶

While it is true that many adults in Towar Gardens do not have a high school education (in 1960, 76 per cent of the residents in Towar Gardens 25 years of

³⁴News item in the Meridian Towne Courier, "Towar Gardens conditions improving," January 28, 1969.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid.

age and older had not completed high school),³⁷ a person well acquainted with them, the principal of Whitehills school, said that

Many people wrongly assume that the majority of families in the Towar area are disadvantaged. They are not; either culturally,³⁸ intellectually, educationally, or economically.

If conventional economic or social deprivation is not significant in Towar Gardens, exactly what is their problem? The answer can be summed up in two words--their image. According to an Ingham County Department of Social Services social worker, "The greatest handicap they have to overcome is the picture in people's minds of Towar Gardens..."³⁹ This contention was supported by a public health nurse who said,

There is a lot of prejudice against Towar Gardens. Most people look down their noses at it. Towar residents know this and some of them are ashamed of living there.⁴⁰

One result of their bad image has been their reluctance, until recently, to participate in governmental functions. Direct citizen participation in school activities, particularly, was rare. According to Mr. Jennings, only a small percentage of Towar parents attended school events or initiated conferences

³⁷U.S. Bureau of the Census, op. cit., Table P-1.

³⁸Jennings, op. cit., p. 40.

³⁹Meridian Towne Courier, loc. cit.

⁴⁰Ibid.

with teachers.⁴¹ Continuing with Mr. Jennings' comments,

Parents simply did not feel involved in the school program. Towar people felt the PTA was "their" [Whitehills'] PTA and not "ours," and because the school is located on the wealthy side of the street it is "their" school, not "ours"... Some Towar parents told me that when they did come to PTA meetings they were never made to feel welcome. Others said they just could not keep up with the "fur coats" worn by the Whitehills area people. No member of the Towar community served on the PTA executive board.⁴²

The lack of participation of Towar residents in the affairs of Whitehills school should not be construed as meaning they did not care about their children's education. Again, Mr. Jennings:

My findings have been that Towar parents are truly interested in education, and in their children receiving a good one. They care for their kids!...Towar parents do believe and see a hope that schools can be a realization of their own aspirations and yearnings for their children.⁴³

Were these aspirations and yearnings realized by Towar children in the East Lansing schools? In all too many cases, no. The same discriminatory subtleties directed toward Towar Gardens adults have been directed toward students, particularly high school students, attending the East Lansing public schools.

Although most overt discriminatory actions towards Towar Gardens youths occur in high school, the

⁴¹Jennings, op. cit., p. 38.

⁴²Ibid., pp. 38, 39.

⁴³Ibid., p. 40.

problems begin in the grade schools. The problem at Whitehills elementary school is closely allied to that of the parents whose children attend the school, i.e., the feeling that it is the Whitehills children's school, not theirs. Several Towar parents have remarked that problems their children were having in high school were aggravated by the fact that their children had to attend Whitehills elementary school.

They [the Towar parents] said the contrast in the socio-economic backgrounds of the children affects the way in which their children adjust and learn in school. Many parents said Towar children should be sent to William Donley School, as they were before Whitehills was built.⁴⁴

At a meeting where economic and social inequities were discussed, East Lansing school officials said that,

Given a school population which ranges from affluent to relatively underprivileged, some discrimination, both subtle and overt, admittedly exists in the school system.

Academic problems arising from economic and social inequities are being handled with a reasonable degree of success by the East Lansing District...[however]...Problems of social acceptance, less easy to measure, have received less attention from community and school.⁴⁵

Factors such as the attendance of about twenty Towar Gardens students at a summer Head Start program at Whitehills school, while they might be helpful in an academic sense, may have had harmful side effects by

⁴⁴Meridian Towne Courier, loc. cit.

⁴⁵News item in Meridian Towne Courier, "School Administration Seek Methods of Eliminating Social-Academic Inequalities," February 11, 1969.

giving the Towar youngsters all the more reason to think that they are "different" from other children at the school.

Certainly not all discriminatory actions towards Towar children are a result of school activities. After his appointment to the Meridian township board, William Armstrong, a Towar resident, explained some of his personal reasons for his involvement in the area saying,

I have a daughter, full of vim and vigor, who would bring friends home from school and they would just stand at the windows and look around... Most of them would never come back.⁴⁶

Another incident at a Cub Scout meeting his wife attended made him even more determined to change the image of Towar Gardens.

My wife came home and told me that the Cubs had been segregated during the meeting--the Towar Gardens kids on one side of the room and the other kids on the other side...I didn't believe her until I went there to see for myself.⁴⁷

From these examples it can be seen that being discriminated against becomes a way of life at an early age for Towar Gardens children.

The real impact of social ostracism seems to reach a climax when Towar youths attend East Lansing high school at an age when social acceptance, especially

⁴⁶News item in Meridian Towne Courier, "New trustee plans Towar action," July 22, 1969.

⁴⁷Ibid.

through the vehicle of dating, becomes so important. According to an Ingham County social worker, "Their problem at the high school is not so much educational as emotional and social...They feel rejected."⁴⁸ One result of the adverse social climate is the dropout rate of Towar teenagers from East Lansing High School. Of the approximately 1,400 students attending East Lansing High School, only 60, or 4.3 per cent, are from the Towar Gardens area; however, when an analysis of dropouts was made in January 1969 for that school year, it was found that 11 of 25 dropouts, or 44 per cent, were from Towar Gardens.⁴⁹ From this it can be seen that, at a one to one ratio, the likelihood of a student dropping out of East Lansing High School is approximately ten times greater for a youth from Towar Gardens than for a student from another locale in the school district. In fact, students from Towar Gardens are often referred to as "pushouts" rather than dropouts.⁵⁰

In the second of a three part series early in 1969 dealing with the problems of the Towar Gardens area, the Towne Courier reported on student attitudes towards Towar youths, based on a questionnaire

⁴⁸Meridian Towne Courier, January 28, 1969.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Ibid.

submitted to all East Lansing high school students. Some of the attitudes expressed included Towar Gardens as the "slums of East Lansing," as "a place where hoods and drop-outs come from," as a "place where people live in bad conditions," and as an area where someone might "get knifed."⁵¹ On the other hand, reactions from Towar Gardens youths included statements such as "We don't tell others where we're from," and, concerning the wall between Whitehills and Towar Gardens,

You can't get around it. You look up and down your street in the morning, or you walk to the corner to catch the bus and you have to look at it or go around it...you see it every day.⁵²

The problem of Mexican-American students at East Lansing High School from Towar Gardens are heightened by the fact that they are discriminated against, not only because of their national origin, but also because they live on the "wrong side of the tracks." According to one Mexican-American student,

Most of us come from what the other kids call a rough neighborhood. They look down on us and crack jokes about us...Its been pretty hard on us for a long time.⁵³

This fact, plus a feeling that they had been left out of history, literature, and music classes at East Lansing

⁵¹News item in Meridian Towne Courier, "Towar students tell of problems," February 4, 1969.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³News item in The State Journal, "Students Make Their Point," December 8, 1969.

High School, led to a threatened Mexican-American student boycott in December 1969. After being given a letter asking that a special committee be formed to meet the needs of Mexican-American students in the school the principal said,

I know that kids from the Towar area often suffer social and other kinds of problems in this school, but I thought it was because of their economic backgrounds, not their Mexican-American heritage.⁵⁴

The Mexican-American students requested an independent study program, open to all students which would give them an identity and would also help other students understand them better. The school principal answered saying that, while a special class may not be possible in the immediate future, additional emphasis would be placed on Mexican-American history in existing classes.⁵⁵

The debilitating effects of the kinds of social discrimination directed towards Towar Gardens residents, particularly towards the young people, cannot be over-emphasized. It has led to feelings of anxiety, inadequacy, and despair. It has escalated the dropout rate of a group of children who are not educationally deprived, but who are deprived of something more important--their self-respect. The very uniqueness of this situation, that is, the relatively high economic level of most Towar Gardens residents along with a lack of cultural deprivation, renders the social discrimination against

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

them to be all the more incongruous with what would be expected--a helping hand and respect for working to upgrade their neighborhood for the past thirty years. It also gives all the more support to the proposition that much more help and support should be given to the Towar area by government officials, particularly those of Meridian Township.

Image is a very important quality to possess, whether it be the image of an individual, a city, or a neighborhood. The image of Towar Gardens as an undesirable place to live reflects negatively on every person who lives there, whether it is an individual who has several junked automobiles in his yard, or whether it is a person who takes pride in the appearance of his property and his neighborhood. Therefore, the argument of some people who live in Towar Gardens and do not maintain the appearance of their homes and yards that "it's nobody else's business" are wrong, both legally and morally.

Much of the blame for the condition of Towar Gardens, physical and social, must be borne by the township government. The legal tools for removing blighting influences from Towar Gardens have been available for over twenty years; the strongest of the tools, the nuisance ordinance, has been in effect (but ineffective) for over ten years. Yet, legal action has been taken

against no one. Many warnings and violation notices have been issued, but they have been for the most part flaunted by people who knew that the township was only "bluffing."

Fortunately, the problems of Towar Gardens are not insurmountable. In fact they are very mild when compared to those found in most metropolitan areas. But this does not mean they should be ignored. The problems will not go away by themselves. A combination of efforts will be needed in the years ahead to help upgrade the physical character and image of Towar Gardens to the extent that children will not be ashamed to say that they live there. The changes must come about through the combined efforts of Meridian Township government, the East Lansing Board of Education, and the Towar people themselves. The Towar Gardens residents have shown through the Towar Action Committee that they are willing to do everything they can to upgrade their neighborhood. Now it is time for school and township officials to do their part. The next chapter will explore how this could be done.

CHAPTER III

THE FUTURE OF TOWAR GARDENS

The future of Towar Gardens, if that future is to be a bright one, is inextricably linked to the determination and will of many groups and individuals capable of helping to solve its problems, and to maximizing the potential of the neighborhood and every person living in it. The task is not small; it is formidable. But it is possible and necessary. The help necessary will have to come from primarily three sources: the East Lansing public schools, Meridian Township, and the residents of Towar Gardens themselves, whether it be through the existing Towar Action Committee or a similar neighborhood organization.

The Role of East Lansing Public Schools

East Lansing school personnel, including teachers, counselors, administrators, and consultants, are in a unique position in their ability to help rectify one of the most serious problems of Towar Gardens youth--the image they have of themselves in their ability to achieve academically and socially, fostered in large measure by the image they present to other students. These needs

are especially apparent in the East Lansing High School where the problems have not been recognized as being quite so severe as in the elementary schools, partly because of the smaller percentage of Towar Gardens students in the high school, and partly because the proximity of the elementary schools to the Towar neighborhood has increased teacher-parent contact to the extent where problems that children have in the classroom can be more readily examined on the basis of the home environment.

So far as education in the classroom is concerned, more will have to be done by teachers and administrators to tailor special programs for Towar Gardens students. In order to do this, increased efforts will have to be made to understand the cultural backgrounds of the children; also, self-analysis will be necessary to help teachers and administrators become aware of their own possible biases and stereotypes towards the children they are teaching. This understanding of cultural backgrounds could be enhanced through greater teacher-parent contacts, both formally as in the PTA, and informally through an expanded program of neighborhood meetings such as those carried on by Mr. Jennings at the Whitehills school.

There have been two drawbacks to active participation in the Whitehills PTA by Towar Gardens parents,

one being the diverse socio-economic characteristics between themselves and Whitehills parents, and the second being the difficulty of active membership in more than one PTA when the children from one family attend more than one elementary school. The first of these problems could be somewhat alleviated by bringing the two groups of parents together more often on an informal basis to discuss such things as changes in school curricula or a proposed field trip; or simple "get acquainted" meetings could be conducted. Resolving the second problem would require a concerted effort on the part of school officials to not send elementary school children from one family to two different schools. Balanced school enrollments should still be possible while pursuing this policy.

Informal meetings with Towar Gardens parents could be expanded to include more faculty members. Meetings of this type have been successful in the past, but most have involved only the Whitehills principal, particularly those meetings in Towar parents' homes. If teachers could also be involved in these meetings, it would enhance the exchange of ideas among faculty members concerning how to better understand the backgrounds of the children, rather than hearing this information handed down from a school administrator.

This understanding of Towar children's backgrounds could help teachers significantly in maintaining positive self-concepts in their students who have undesirable images of their learning abilities and social acceptability. According to Mr. Jennings,

How a child views himself...is dependent upon how others view him...The self-concept develops through the interaction of the child and adults who are important to the child. For the lower-socio-economic child, the teacher can be a significant factor. The teacher through verbal and non-verbal communications influences the manner in which a child views himself.¹

Many studies by educators have substantiated the premise that children's self-perceptions depend a great deal on how their teachers feel about them.² For this reason, it is imperative that teachers of Towar Gardens children do all they can to enhance this self-image. If this is done, the heterogeneity of the classrooms, in respect to the socio-economic status of the students, can be a real benefit in promoting upward social mobility as a goal of the Towar Gardens children.

Continuing to take advantage of the special programs available under Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, which provides federal funds for the education of disadvantaged children, should prove to be beneficial to the Towar Gardens children if it is not held up as a social stigma by the more affluent families in the community. An important

¹Jennings, op. cit., p. 79.

²Ibid., p. 82.

part of this program should be to educate the non-participants as to its value to the entire community in promoting greater chances of educational achievement and cultural enrichment in the children who do participate.

The improvement of self-image in Towar Gardens children when they are in elementary should carry over to their attendance at middle school and East Lansing High School, but the problem would remain of how to change their image in the eyes of non-Towar Gardens students. Understandably, the approach to improve the situation as suggested for the elementary schools could not be used in the high school, one reason being the smaller percentage of Towar Gardens students in the high school population which would preclude intensive involvement by the teachers. What could be done, though, is to involve more of the high school students in the Towar Gardens community with projects like that of the Spanish Club to build a new playground in the Towar neighborhood. These projects could include such things as planning and helping in the annual clean-up campaign, or assisting the SCOPE volunteers with their activities for the younger Towar children.

The East Lansing schools could also do more in providing recreational facilities for the Towar Gardens area. Several programs have evolved over the past few

years for the Towar area, either through the East Lansing schools recreation division, or through outside organizations and individuals who are allowed to use school buildings for their activities.

In their own programs, which are joint efforts with the City of East Lansing, the East Lansing school board provides gymnastics classes, a variety of swimming classes, dance workshops, and various health classes. The fees for these activities range from five dollars to twenty-five dollars, with most student swimming classes ranging between \$6.75 and twelve dollars.³ Many families in Towar Gardens cannot afford to pay these fees, and reduced rates for people who need them are not available. Other outdoor recreational facilities are available at the city parks and school playgrounds. Summer programs are conducted with playground leaders at each school, including Whitehills and Donley schools. The problem remains, however, that for Towar children to take advantage of these facilities, they must cross Lake Lansing Road.

There are several recreational programs designed for Towar Gardens youths, but not conducted by school personnel. These include a 4-H program, a volunteer-staffed athletic and recreation club, and the newly formed teenage drop-in center at the Towar Gardens school.

³East Lansing, Board of Education, "East Lansing Recreation Programs," (East Lansing, Michigan, 1969), (Mimeographed).

The Shamrock 4-H club, consisting of about 60 boys and girls between the ages of 8 and 14, meets once or twice a week at either the Towar-Hart community center or the Whitehills school. Until this year, all the children in the club were from the Towar Gardens area; however, over one half of the current membership is from the Whitehills area. The coordinator of this program stated that she was encouraged by the integrating of children from the two communities, and she hoped that the physical wall between the two neighborhoods could be broken down as well as the mental wall.⁴ Activities of the Shamrock 4-H club include sewing, foods, and nutrition classes for the girls, and wood-working projects for the boys.

A successful volunteer effort has also been launched by a member of the Lansing Parks and Recreation department who plans to incorporate his Towar Gardens program as part of a North Side Athletic and Recreation Club. In this program, Tuesdays and Thursdays during after-school and evening hours are devoted to working with youngsters from the Towar Gardens area with athletic and recreational activities at the Whitehills school. Also included in the program are field trips, skating parties, and recently a visit to a Mexican exhibit at the Michigan State University museum where several Mexican-American youngsters from

⁴News item in the Ingham County News, "Towar 4-H spans 'the wall'," February 25, 1970.

Towar Gardens were given the opportunity to learn more about their cultural heritage. This program was started about two years ago with some financial help from civic groups and churches, plus the cooperation of the East Lansing Board of Education which offered the use of school facilities.⁵

The newest recreation project for Towar Gardens has been the creation of a teenage drop-in center at the Towar Gardens school, the culmination of a six month dialogue between the Towar Action Committee and the East Lansing Board of Education concerning where and how the school board could provide indoor recreational facilities in Towar Gardens for Towar teenagers. The school board had been reluctant to give up any space in the Towar school which was being used as a warehouse; the Towar Action Committee wanted the use of the entire building, so the outcome could be termed a compromise settlement.

The drop-in center has been a tremendous success since it opened in early February of this year. The first organizational meeting was attended by over thirty Towar teenagers who elected their own officers, formed committees, and sponsored two dances which were attended by overflow crowds of local teenagers. A portion of the 1,500 dollars from OEO to supplement the SCOPE community center program will be used for the

⁵News item in the Meridian Towne Courier, "One-man volunteer effort aids inner-city youngsters," February 3, 1970.

new drop-in center. Donations of equipment have already been made for the new center, including a ping pong table and a pool table.

It is apparent that much has been accomplished towards meeting the recreational needs of Towar Gardens children and teenagers, much of it through volunteer efforts. Progress has been made in obtaining space for these programs in East Lansing school facilities, but not without a great deal of effort on the part of Towar Gardens residents. Since the needs for these facilities were so apparent, especially for the drop-in center, there should not have been such a high degree of reluctance on the part of East Lansing school officials in providing them.

The degree to which the East Lansing schools have extended themselves in providing recreational facilities consists of keeping two school buildings open extra hours and providing the custodial services and utilities necessary for the extended hours. School officials have not provided any manpower for Towar Gardens programs, nor have they extended any special privileges in their regular recreation programs, such as reduced swimming fees, for the children in Towar Gardens whom they know to be economically unable to participate with the regular fee schedule. This is borne out by the fact that SCOPE volunteers must take the children

to the MSU pool for free swimming; they are not allowed, without charge, to use the East Lansing swimming facilities where the Towar children could associate with other children their own age.

The special needs of the Towar Gardens community have not been recognized by the majority of East Lansing school officials. These needs include outdoor recreational facilities. The contention that Towar children can use the Whitehills and Donley school facilities are not valid; Lake Lansing Road serves as an effective barrier in keeping the Towar children north of it. The East Lansing schools have vacant sites where a new warehouse could be built thereby giving the Towar Gardens area young people the extra room they need in the Towar Gardens school. The East Lansing school system, until about a year and a half ago, did not have a warehouse, and it is doubtful that they need all the room they are occupying in the Towar Gardens school. The need has been proven by the numbers of teenagers attending the new drop-in center; what remains is for the East Lansing Board of Education to make a commitment to meet that need.

In reference to providing outdoor recreational facilities for the Towar Gardens area, it has been the contention of the school board that Meridian Township should provide these facilities, or at least provide

them jointly with the schools.⁶ The township official present at the meeting where this suggestion was made was non-committal, saying only that he would look into the possibilities of such an arrangement. Other than contributing an annual amount of money to the school districts in Meridian Township for recreation purposes (1,050 dollars was given to East Lansing in 1969), the township has done little in providing recreational facilities. Next will be discussed the potential role of Meridian Township in providing some of these facilities, as well as meeting the other needs of the Towar Gardens community.

The Role of Meridian Township

There are a number of ways in which Meridian Township officials could help meet the needs of Towar Gardens. These needs, to be met, must be dealt with on both a short-range and long-range basis. The township board must take the primary responsibility for meeting the immediate needs of the community, since they alone have the authority to make binding policy decisions concerning the implementation of specific programs or proposals. Another role, and one which could have the most far reaching consequences for the Towar Gardens area, must be accepted by the planning commission and planning department which are in a position to determine that longer-range goals, policies, and programs are

⁶Statement by Malcom Katz, East Lansing school superintendent at the meeting referenced in text.

consistent with the objectives necessary to solve the problems and meet the needs of the Towar Gardens community. This does not mean, though, that the planners cannot play an important role in solving the most immediate problems of the Towar area; they can do this primarily by acting as close advisors to the township board. We shall first consider the most immediate needs of the Towar area, and ways in which to meet them.

The first priority needs of Towar Gardens are not necessarily more important than the longer-range needs, but they are of such a nature that they lend themselves to a more immediate solution. These needs include, (1) the removal of junk automobiles and other nuisance factors from the neighborhood, (2) the establishment of additional recreation facilities, (3) the improvement of communication channels between the township and other governmental units and agencies concerned with the Towar area, including the coordination of activities and improvement of communication between township officials and the people of Towar Gardens, and (4) the maximization of citizen participation in conjunction with (3) above, and as a framework for establishing longer-range goals and the programs necessary to achieve them.

The removal of nuisance factors from Towar Gardens could do a great deal in improving the appearance

of the area which is necessary, not only for esthetic or health reasons, but also to improve the image of the area. Progress has been made in getting reluctant homeowners and landlords to remove junk from their properties, but not without a concerted effort in recent weeks. The number of junked automobiles in the area has been reduced from nearly 180 a year ago to about 10 at the present time. A major problem, according to the building inspector, is that certain people pull "new" junk automobiles back into the area almost as fast as they are forced to remove them.

In early March of this year, five Meridian Township residents were arraigned by the Ingham County District Court on charges of violating the township nuisance ordinance. Four of the five violations occurred in the Towar Gardens area. This was the first time that warrants had been issued for violators of the ordinance, and the action was happily received by many residents of Towar Gardens who had been advocating prosecution. Whether or not this action will serve as a deterrent to other existing or potential ordinance violators remains to be seen; however, it has served as notice that the township is becoming stricter in enforcing its nuisance ordinance.

The problem still exists, however, that a lack of adequate manpower in the Meridian Township building

department for enforcement of the nuisance ordinance may lead to a regression to the previous policy of non-enforcement, particularly if residential building trends increase in the township which would increase the amount of necessary inspection time and decrease the time available for nuisance and zoning ordinance enforcement. For this reason, the township should seriously consider applying for a federal code enforcement grant which would provide up to three-fourth of eligible costs "...for the planning and execution of the code enforcement program and the provision of certain street improvements."⁷ As part of this program, financial assistance in the form of direct three per cent interest loans and grants of up to 3,000 dollars would be available to eligible area residents. The avowed purpose of this program is to

...restore the stability of basically sound but deteriorating neighborhoods by providing adequate public facilities and by using code enforcement as a preventative action to reverse the forces of blight before more drastic action, such as extensive rehabilitation or clearance, becomes necessary.⁸

To be eligible for receiving such a grant, the township would have to: have a certified Workable Program for Community Improvement; be carrying out an effective program of code enforcement; agree to maintain normal levels of expenditures for code enforcement; agree to provide relocation assistance to any persons displaced

⁷Office of Economic Opportunity, Catalogue of Federal Domestic Assistance (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1969), p. 320.

⁸Ibid.

by project activities; provide at local expense those public facilities not eligible for project costs, but which are necessary to accomplish the purpose of the program.⁹

One of the requirements for a Workable Program is a housing code, which the township has never formally adopted. This code must be in effect for a minimum of six months before certification of a Workable Program will be given. Therefore, to apply for a code enforcement grant as soon as possible, the township should adopt a suitable housing code at the earliest possible date. The establishment of such a code enforcement program would help considerably in removing one of the most serious blighting influences in the Towar Gardens neighborhood, the junked automobiles and other accumulated rubbish.

The establishment of additional recreation facilities in Towar Gardens is another of the immediate needs of the community. There are at least three ways in which the township could become involved in providing these recreational facilities: (1) by helping existing or new volunteer organizations now providing these services, such as the East Lansing High School Spanish Club, the SCOPE volunteers, and the North Side Athletic and Recreation Club, (2) by inviting the East Lansing public schools to cooperate in the school-park program,

⁹Ibid.

and implementing the program on vacant school-owned land in Towar Gardens, and (3) by applying for outside aids for recreation programs, such as state and/or federal funds.

Some of the existing volunteer organizations concerned with recreation in Towar Gardens could do a more effective job with help from the township government. The high school Spanish Club has been somewhat stymied in its efforts to provide a playground north of Lake Lansing Road. First, their advisor has been ill and unable to put forth an intensive effort in building the playground and, second, much of the equipment and expertise needed to improve the vacant lot, such as grading and constructing a fence to keep the smaller children away from Lake Lansing Road, is not available to either the Spanish Club or other residents of the community. Meridian Township has both the equipment and personnel to help the Spanish Club construct the playground facilities which, even though intended as temporary facilities, could help meet the children's needs until a more adequate permanent site was developed. In the case of the SCOPE program at the Towar-Hart community center and the North Side Athletic and Recreation Club activities at the Whitehills school, the township could at least commend their efforts in the form of a resolution and ask if there was any further support that they could give.

The Meridian Township board in 1965 entered into an agreement with the Haslett and Okemos Boards of Education to promote the multiple use concept of land resources by establishing school-parks, the cost and maintenance of which would be shared jointly by the school boards and township government.¹⁰ The East Lansing Board of Education was not included in the agreement; however, to date this fact has not made much difference since the agreement has yet to be implemented between any of the participating units. The reason for this has been that Meridian Township was financially unable to implement it, and had no active parks and recreation committee or department to administer such a program. The outlook for such a program is much brighter today since Meridian is at the threshold of cityhood which in all likelihood would also mean the establishment of a parks and recreation department or the reactivation of a parks commission. In anticipation of being able to implement the school-park concept in the near future, the Meridian Township board should invite the East Lansing Board of Education to participate in the program. In that way, planning efforts now underway could account for possible township development of outdoor recreational facilities on either of the two parcels of land in Towar Gardens which are owned by the East Lansing schools. Thus, a more

¹⁰Okemos Board of Education, Haslett Board of Education, and Meridian Township, "School Park Agreement" (Haslett, Michigan: January 30, 1965). (Mimeographed.)

permanent park could be in existence by the time the three year lease expires on the land planned for playground development by the Spanish Club.

A third way in which the township could help provide needed recreational facilities for Towar Gardens would be to secure the additional funds necessary to either acquire a township park in the neighborhood, or to construct the necessary facilities on one of the East Lansing school district sites. These additional funds could come from the state and/or federal government, or from private donations. The township recently applied for a portion of the multi-million dollar recreation bonds administered by the state Department of Natural Resources. This application was rejected by the state, but a new application will be filed as soon as possible. The first application mentioned the needs of the township, and particularly the needs of some of the poorer areas such as Towar Gardens, but it did not propose any facilities specifically for the people who needed them the most, i.e., the Towar area. What was proposed included the development of a lake on the township-owned property north of Meridian Mall. This lake would be part of a community park which the township, including Towar Gardens, is in need of. However, more of a need exists for smaller parks and playfields in areas such as Towar Gardens, since these facilities would not only serve as recreational areas, but would

also serve to upgrade the general neighborhood quality. For this reason, the next application by the township for state recreational funds should include a proposal for some recreational facility in the Towar Gardens area.

Financial assistance for recreation facilities is also available from the federal government. One such program, Outdoor Recreation Financial Assistance, makes grants available on a fifty-fifty matching basis for approved projects, one of which is urban playgrounds. One stipulation of the grant is that the facility fit into the state's comprehensive outdoor recreation plan.¹¹ The possibility of obtaining a grant such as this should be thoroughly explored by township officials, particularly if funds from other sources are not available.¹²

The third important role that Meridian Township could, and should, play in helping to meet the needs of the Towar Gardens community is that of a coordinator of activities and disseminator of information through improved channels of communication.

The need for increased coordination in governmental activities is often thought to be important only in larger metropolitan areas. However, the need for

¹¹Office of Economic Opportunity, op. cit., p. 343.

¹²It should be noted that the City of East Lansing has obtained both federal and state grants for their parks and recreation programs. The planning area for East Lansing includes the Towar Gardens area, and a park has been proposed west of Whitehills school south of Lake Lansing Road. Towar residents have asked the City of East Lansing for a neighborhood park north of Lake Lansing Road, and the issue has not been resolved to date.

this coordination in Meridian Township, especially in and for the Towar Gardens area, has become increasingly important. Governmental services are provided by the township (fire and police protection, public works, assessing, planning), by the East Lansing school district (education and recreation) and by the county (roads and road maintenance, drainage, social and welfare services, and public health). When volunteer efforts are added to these governmental activities, the question to who should be doing what becomes particularly troublesome. This has been one of the primary causes for frequent complaints by Towar residents of too much "red tape" and "passing the buck" in determining whose responsibility it is to provide certain services. If measures can be taken in larger metropolitan areas to reduce inefficiencies and duplication of services, surely such measures can be taken in Meridian Township.

A step in this direction has been taken in the background studies for an Information and Communications Plan being prepared by the Meridian Township planning commission as part of their "701" planning program. The study includes an inventory of governmental and professional services available to the people of the township, as well as an inventory of community service organizations and their effectiveness.¹³ The results of this study should indicate where improvements could be made in providing better services to Towar Gardens. These

¹³Meridian Charter Township Planning Commission, "Outline--Information and Communication Plan" (Haslett, Michigan) (Mimeographed).

results should be made available to all governmental and service organizations involved in the township, and the Meridian Township Board of Trustees should take the initiative and bring representatives of these organizations together to discuss how duplications of effort could be minimized and services maximized. The township board has initiated such meetings with the two major school districts in the township, Okemos and Haslett, but has not attempted it on a larger scale with several organizations. Such meetings should be fruitful for each organization as well as the people of Towar Gardens.

Better methods of communication are necessary, not only between Meridian Township and other units of government, but also between township officials and residents of the Towar Gardens community. The township officials have never fully understood the needs of the Towar area, just as Towar Gardens residents have never understood why the township was not able to meet all of their needs. It was difficult for Towar residents to look across Lake Lansing Road and see all the city services provided for the Whitehills subdivision, while they were receiving so few. (They may not have realized, either, that their local government taxes were only about one-fourth the amount paid by East Lansing residents.) Local newspapers served as a forum for charges and

counter-charges between Towar residents and township officials; most face-to-face meetings between the two groups were non-productive simply because adequate explanations for their actions were not offered by township officials.

As mentioned previously, the potential of local neighborhood groups to contribute to community decision-making depends on at least three broad factors, one of which is the communication process. Referring again to the township planners' Information and Communication Plan, its stated purpose is to create "A plan for increasing citizen awareness and involvement in the growth and development of their community..."¹⁴ Also stated in the outline of the plan is that,

We...assume that a communication problem exists between public and private problem-solving agencies, and potential recipients of problem-solving services.¹⁵

The awareness that such a problem exists is at least a start towards solving the problem. The Meridian Township planners should continue to investigate the problems caused by the lack of communication and, more importantly, ensure that the township board knows about the problem and what steps they can take to alleviate it.

During a recent misunderstanding between the Towar Action Committee and the township board concerning actions taken by a township official, a suggestion was

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid.

made by the new board member from Towar Gardens that the township board meet privately with the action committee to discuss their needs and what might be done to meet them; however, such a meeting was rejected by board members in favor of solving the immediate crisis situation. This method of problem-solving can only lead to increased misunderstandings between government and people, as well as inefficiencies and probable higher costs in meeting the long-range needs of Towar Gardens.

Increased communication almost always means increased citizen participation. Increased citizen participation almost always means more meetings and additional work for political leaders and appointed government officials. This is one reason why citizen participation is so often talked about and so seldom practiced. The planners in Meridian Township are in one of the best positions to actively solicit citizen participation, particularly in the development of their comprehensive plan. Although exigencies of meeting unrealistically short deadlines precluded extensive citizen participation in the actual preparation of all portions of that plan, some effort should have been made to meet with Towar Action Committee representatives in determining the long and short-range programs necessary to meet their needs, particularly when one of their greatest

needs is increased communication to and from township hall.

The importance of citizen participation, types of citizen participation, and methods of achieving citizen participation, have been the subject of literally hundreds of articles, books, monographs, government studies, and theses in recent years, and to explore any number of them is outside the scope of this discussion. The very foundations of planning principles have been rocked by debates over the meaningfulness and efficacy of citizen participation. Citizen participation has, in a sense, become a way of life in Towar Gardens in recent months; but it is participation in the form of an alliance to fight the "enemy" at township hall, as well as the "enemy" of junk automobiles, dilapidated housing, and discrimination. The people in Towar Gardens recognized the influence they could have on governmental decision-making by demanding that their rights to certain services be recognized. The real tragedy is that the excellent leadership abilities and energies which came out of the Towar Gardens community had to be directed towards fighting township hall instead of working with township officials to find common solutions to the problems at hand. Hopefully, the attitudes of township officials will change and take advantage of the spirit and energies of a dedicated

group of people who are willing to spend many hours improving their own neighborhood. Perhaps the change to city status, if it becomes a reality, will hasten efforts to improve channels of communication through increased citizen participation.

The short-range needs of Towar Gardens have been discussed, as well as possible programs to help meet them. The longer-range needs include a comprehensive program to guide private development in that area to further enhance the environment which should be much improved through the shorter range code enforcement program. This longer range program, which should be formulated with the residents of Towar Gardens similarly to the short-range program, could include a street paving program, additional public relation efforts to further upgrade the image of the area, and plans for increasing the amount of police protection in the area. Many of these efforts could be initiated by Meridian Township planners.

The role in which township planners could be most helpful would be that in which their special expertise lies (at least the expertise of most planners), i.e., determining what kind of future growth should occur in the neighborhood. Changes will be taking place in the near future which could have far reaching effects on the Towar Gardens area, particularly the

extension of Hagadorn Road to Birchrow Drive, a project which will be carried out in conjunction with the development of Carriage Hill Estates directly east of the Towar area. The impact of these changes on Towar Gardens must be accounted for, whether the expected results would be favorable or unfavorable. Of particular importance to the long-range development of the Towar area are plans of the Whitehills Development Corporation which owns nearly seventy parcels of land in the Towar area. Everyone wonders what Mr. White's future plans are for the area. Towar residents wonder. Township officials wonder. Who knows? Undoubtedly Mr. White knows, at least tentatively/speculatively, what his future plans for the area entail. Apparently no one has bothered to ask him, since he was not the least bit reluctant to discuss them with the writer of this thesis. Again, the lack of communication between individuals and groups has led to a proliferation of misinformation and misunderstanding. The township planners should take the initiative to get these groups together--Towar residents, township officials, and Mr. White--to discuss the future of Towar Gardens and to formulate specific policies to achieve agreed-upon goals. In this way the communication gap could be closed, at least partially, while serving as springboard to formulating realistic action programs for the future of Towar Gardens.

The missing link in the triumverate of roles to be discussed is, of course, the people of Towar Gardens themselves. What should they expect from government officials? What issues should they pursue? And finally, what internal organizational structure will best help them achieve their goals and objectives?

The Role of the Towar Gardens Community

The people to Towar Gardens have found a means of changing their status in the community, as well as a means for accomplishing some of their immediate objectives; this means has been through the organized use of power--Towar Power. As stated by Clarence King in his book, Working with People in Community Action,

More and more it seems that meaningful change in the status of the poor is not likely to come about--except very slowly, indeed--through the benevolent paternalism or good will of the majoritarian society. In the face of this situation some see no real alternative to the mobilization and exercise of power by the poor themselves.¹⁶

There is no doubt that this exercise of power through the formation of the Towar Action Committee has not been successful. Recently, warrants were issued for the arrest of several persons refusing to comply with the Meridian Township zoning and nuisance ordinances, a measure not previously taken despite twenty-one years or unorganized protests from the Towar Gardens community, as well as from other areas of the township. Although there is no doubt of the past and present effectiveness

¹⁶Warner Bloomberg Jr. and Henry J. Schmandt, Power, Poverty, and Urban Policy (urban Affairs Annual Reviews, Vol. 2., Beverly Hills, California: Sage Publications, Inc., 1968), p. 252.

of the Towar Action Committee, the question remains as to what their organizational structure and strategies should be in the future to best reach their objectives.

There are both advantages and disadvantages to the formation (in this case, continuation) of neighborhood organizations. In discussing the pros and cons of formal groups, Irwin Sanders cites the following advantages:

1. An organization provides mutual stimulation among the members. The greater the number of people working on a topic, the greater will be the social experience brought to bear on that topic.
2. An organization fixes certain responsibilities and duties both upon its officers and its members... Thus, through organization, people can be more certain that specific jobs will be done.
3. An organization gives continuity to a program since it provides for one set of officers to succeed another and for self renewal in the taking in of new members.
4. Forming an organization gives public recognition to programs, because most people upon learning of a new group will ask what it has set out to do.¹⁷

Also in that discussion, the following disadvantages of formal organizations are noted:

1. An informal group [more than a formal group] at times may assure the cooperation of everyone on a more equal footing.
2. An organization may meet the opposition of vested interests or of other groups already strongly established.

¹⁷John C. Freeman, "The Potential of Local Citizen Organizations for Contributing to the Planning Decision Making Process" (unpublished Master's thesis, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan, 1966), pp. 62-63, citing Irwin Sanders, Making Good Communities Better (Lexington, Kentucky Press, 1953), pp. 61-63.

3. If the activity is of short-run nature and must be accomplished quickly, there is no need to give it the permanence implied in a formal organization.
4. In some communities, people do not have a good record of working together in organizations. Formal groups often become debating societies where more friction than cooperation results.
5. People representing different groups and interests often can work out programs requiring compromise much better on an informal basis.¹⁸

Undoubtedly the advantages of formal group action in Towar Gardens have far outweighed the disadvantages since they achieved several objectives which were not attainable through unorganized or less formal group action.

This is not to say that the Towar Action Committee has existed without internal difficulties. On the contrary, there have been problems of disinterest once an immediate objective had been reached, which subsequently led to an unequal and unfair distribution of the work load for achieving objectives. Jennings writes,

When TAC completed their cleanup day, there was a slight amount of apathy on the part of two committee members whether further organizational outputs would justify their inputs of personal commitments. These two members resigned saying they really were not really [sic] "interested in recreation stuff."¹⁹

Jennings goes on to say that it was nothing serious and that two new members were easily found.²⁰ However, when this writer attended an Action Committee meeting in November 1969, there was some degree of concern expressed

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Jennings, op. cit., p. 58.

²⁰ Ibid.

about a growing lack of interest on the part of some members who failed to attend committee meetings. Also at this meeting, the chairman of the TAC resigned saying he could no longer afford to spend the needed time on their activities. A new chairman was elected at that time, a woman who previously and subsequently was the most active member of the committee.

Also at that November 1969 meeting, the Towar Action Committee was presented with the following list of recommendations, formulated by Mr. Jennings, designed to "...innovate or renovate or maintain the TAC..."²¹

1. Keep the size of the committee small, so the personal touch stays in and people will feel wanted and needed.
2. "Taking a vacation" from the push of activities occasionally will give the committee time for reflection, refreshment, and restoration.
3. Do not allow a few to do it all.
4. Maintain good leadership in the group. Too few people willing to do the work, or all Indians and no chiefs could become a serious threat to the group.
5. Prevent subgroups and factions from splintering off to other goals or from taking over the committee and doing harm to the program.
6. Prevent becoming wound up in "red tape," and from allowing organizational structure from impeding the group's action. The more machinery that is set up, the more chance there is that something can go wrong with the machinery.
7. Be watchful of indecision. The group can burn up a great deal of energy, hard work, but never decide to move and make progress.

²¹Ibid., p. 60.

8. Maintain a list of priorities. Keep the list before the group, crossing off accomplishments as they occur. Send minutes of meetings to all members as a record of what action was taken and which members consented to do which things.

Some of the above recommendations were directed toward then-existing problem situations, such as warning against letting a few people do all the work. Most of the recommendations, however, were warnings against changing previously successful methods of operation.

A decision which the Towar Action Committee will have to make in the future will be whether to continue to "go it alone," or whether to seek help for their neighborhood organization through an instrument such as the Community Action Program (CAP). The Towar community's reluctance to depend on outside help was evident in meetings with Office of Economic Opportunity officials when discussing the availability of funds for a Towar recreation program. Feelings expressed were that outside sources of funds were necessary, but not outside influences or controls which might dictate the types of recreational activities to be carried on in the Towar community. Of particular concern was a fear expressed that the SCOPE volunteers from Michigan State University might have to change their program in some way to meet federal guidelines. This fear was enhanced by the fact that the SCOPE volunteer program had been so well liked by the Towar Gardens children.

Committee members agreed to accept federal aid only after the OEO representative said she was sure that the present program would be satisfactory.

The reluctance of the Towar community to accept federal guidelines for a recreation program would probably mean that a program such as the OEO sponsored Community Action Program would not be suitable for their community. This does not mean, however, that lessons could not be learned from other federally-aided community projects. Factors and techniques for the successful conduct of group activities have been formulated by the Office of Economic Opportunity from lessons they have learned in the administration of the Community Action Program. Many of the federally-aided neighborhood groups, as indicated in case study reports, have had problems similar to those of the Towar Gardens community, and it appears that their suggested techniques would be very helpful for the Towar Action Committee in their continuing program for achieving short-range and long-range goals. These suggested techniques include: (1) a plan of action, (2) a well documented case with specific proposals, (3) access to training and technical assistance, (4) self-help efforts, (5) community-wide support, (6) publicity and public education, and (7) action by the group.²²

²²United States Office of Economic Opportunity, "Participation of the Poor in the Community Decision-Making Process" (Washington: Government Printing Office, August, 1969), p. 14.

The plan of action must be composed of several elements including the information that will be needed, the resources that will be needed to achieve each goal, the implications of alternative courses of action, and a timetable for each phase of the plan.²³ The Towar Action Committee has not formulated this type of plan, partly because they have never formally taken the step which proceeds this, the formulation of goals. They have discussed areas of concern or problems--substandard housing, lack of recreational facilities, inadequate police protection, etc.--but the committee has not transformed problem statements into goal-oriented statements designed to overcome the problems. A first priority for the TAC then should be, if they wish to remain a viable community organization, to adopt a set of goals and objectives, after which the plan of action can be formulated.

Well-documented evidence of need is also required to "sell" the Towar community's program to other groups, particularly government officials. All too often the TAC has come before the Meridian Township board with complaints of "lots of junked cars" in their neighborhood or "dangerous traffic conditions" on Lake Lansing Road, when they should be saying, for example, that "there are 73 junked cars" or "latest counts show a traffic volume of 1,800 vehicles per day on Lake Lansing

²³Ibid.

Road." Also, in reference to their recreational needs, the committee should take neighborhood surveys of the number of children who would use these facilities so that the need can be proven with figures and not only on the basis of emotions.

Training and technical assistance are necessary to help the Towar community in developing proposals and carrying out projects. This assistance could come from persons both within and outside the Towar Gardens neighborhood. Help of this nature has already been secured from persons such as James Jennings, the principal of Whitehills school, and Robert Cavazos, a recreation specialist for the City of Lansing, who is directing a volunteer recreation program. However, additional technical help would better enable the community to run their own program. An advocate planner would be an excellent example of the kind of technical advice which would be helpful.

The effectiveness of self-help efforts cannot be over-emphasized, since nearly everything the Towar community has accomplished has been through self-help. The establishment of an annual clean-up day is one example of how self-help has been successful in Towar Gardens. These self-help efforts indicate to the rest of the community the real concern and dedication of a neighborhood group in help to solve their own problems.

This should help improve the image of Towar Gardens which is, in itself, one of the community's most debilitating problems.

Community-wide support, i.e., the support of people outside the Towar Gardens area, is important for several reasons. First, the community-at-large can contribute technical advice from its supply of technically oriented people, particularly those associated with the university. Second, they can create awareness of Towar's problems in the larger community, thereby helping to mobilize the resources necessary to solve the problems and, at the same time, help to improve the image of Towar Gardens in the Meridian/East Lansing community. And finally, they can exert influence (or pressure) on governmental officials and agencies to do more in helping to solve Towar's problems.

Publicity is another key to the successful continuation of improvement efforts in Towar Gardens. The role of newspaper coverage in past projects has had a significant influence on the success of their program, particularly in chiding government officials into action. Newspaper reports have also led to increased community support and donations for several projects. For example, a ping pong table and pool table have already been donated for the newly-opened teenage drop-in center. If further organization takes place within the Towar Action

Committee, such as the formal establishment of goals and priorities, the newspapers, radio, and television would be excellent mediums to transmit the new program throughout the community. This press coverage also serves to upgrade the image of the Towar area since the concern of the people over their environment is obvious through their self-help efforts.

Summary

From the preceding discussion, it can be seen that the role of the Towar Gardens community itself can be very significant in solving their problems and meeting their needs through group action. The community has proven itself to be capable of exercising considerable power through good leadership and perseverance. The time has come, however, for reflection upon past accomplishments as well as unmet needs to determine the best alternatives for future action. No one can tell the Towar Gardens community what courses of action they should pursue in the future, for these are decisions they must make for themselves. If past performances are an indication of future potentials, the people of Towar Gardens will continue to control their own destiny in an effective manner.

Despite good leadership and enthusiasm, the Towar Gardens community will not be able to solve their problems alone, nor should they be expected to. They

pay taxes and are entitled to governmental services which, they feel, they have not been receiving. Although located in Meridian Township, the Towar Gardens community is served by a multiplicity of government agencies including the East Lansing school system, Ingham County, and the federal government through the Office of Economic Opportunity, as well as the township government. What is needed is a coordinated attack on the problems of Towar Gardens, a function which is not presently undertaken by any governmental unit or agency. This function could best be carried out by Meridian Township as part of a new relationship to work more closely with the people of Towar Gardens. Again, it should be reiterated that improved communications between township government and the people of Towar Gardens is of primary importance in achieving mutual understanding. When an understanding is reached of what services the local governments can provide to Towar Gardens, and what services they are unable to provide, then alternative courses of action can be formulated and pursued.

The role of planners in improving the Towar Gardens situation could be significant, should they choose to accept that role. This includes planning commissioners and the planning staff at Meridian Township, as well as other planners in the community who

could act as advocate planners in helping to identify goals, and programs to implement them, for the Towar community. Planners are usually quick to point out their special expertise in viewing the many facets and implications of a particular problem situation; however, too often they limit their thinking to government agency problems without including some very real "people problems" within the community. Some further implications of the Towar Gardens situation, and other situations like it, will be examined in the next chapter.

CHAPTER IV

A BROADER PERSPECTIVE: LESSONS FOR PLANNERS (AND OTHERS)

The preceding chapters have traced the history of the Towar Gardens community in respect to its characteristics, its problems and how they evolved, and the reluctance of governmental agencies to contribute significantly to the amelioration of these problems and their underlying causes. Discussed were the substandard government services dating back to the 1930's, particularly the lack of code enforcement after a zoning ordinance was adopted in 1948, and the reluctance to provide adequate recreational facilities for the area. It was also pointed out that corrective measures could be taken by government officials, particularly those of Meridian Township, without expending significantly larger sums of money. The important role played by citizen organizations, particularly the Towar Action Committee, but also including volunteer efforts of SCOPE, The North Side Athletic and Recreation Club, and others was examined in light of what they have already achieved and what they could expect to accomplish in the future.

Some of the other themes discussed in this paper included the importance of communication, both as a public relations device and as a tool to coordinate governmental and volunteer services, the importance that image and self-concept play in the lives of people and their goals and aspirations, whether it is the image of a group of people, per se, or the image of their neighborhood, and the importance of citizen participation. Any one of these topics is, of course, important enough to be treated by itself at the academic level attempted in this thesis, as indeed these topics have been discussed numerous times at the thesis level as well as in other academic endeavors. The overriding theme, however, was the necessity of government officials, especially planners, to recognize the special needs of a particular neighborhood and the people who live in it, and to initiate open channels of communication with these people to help them solve their problems.

This help is needed not only for the inner-city ghetto areas where problems are compounded by racial discrimination, widespread unemployment, and high rates of crime, but is needed also in areas such as Towar Gardens where the majority of people are not disadvantaged except in the image they present to the community at large. The debilitating effect this

discrimination, both subtle and overt, has on the youth of Towar Gardens is particularly disturbing, for this holds a promise for little more than a perpetuation of the current situation. The greatest encouragement has been, in recent months, the exercise of power by the people of Towar Gardens themselves and, as a result, some commitment by Meridian Township and the East Lansing Board of Education to help them with the services and facilities they need. The Towar Action Committee has shown that, at least in their case, tactics involving violence or other forms of socially unacceptable behavior are not necessary in the exercise of citizen power--only persistence is really necessary, although more dogmatic strengths, such as a good organizational structure, also are helpful.

Although the people of Towar Gardens have done much in the past year to improve their neighborhood, they should not be expected to do the work that government agencies are supposed to provide. But what should their local government provide? Is it just parks, playgrounds, and code enforcement, or is it more? More specifically, what is the role of the planner, both professional and commissioner, within the confines of a governmental agency? Specific recommendations were offered previously on how government officials and others could help the Towar Gardens community. Next, we

will explore the changing role of planners in general, along with some thoughts on participatory democracy and citizen involvement.

The Changing Role of Planners

No one can contest the fact that planners have become much more aware in the past decade of the social implications of physical plan proposals. Not that all planners, or even a very large percentage of them have changed their land use perspective into a broader social orientation, but they could not have helped being deluged with articles, monographs, books, convention speeches, "confrontations," etc. dealing with this subject matter. No doubt many planners have sat back while listening to someone lament the quality of human life in "Central City," saying to themselves, "I'm sure glad I don't have all those social problems in my suburb!" Or do they? Meridian Township is a suburb. And for the most part, an "upper class" one at that. Is it possible that almost all urban or suburban areas have their own "Towar Gardens," whether their problems are their image, an accumulation of rubbish, or simply a feeling that their local government officials have treated them unfairly? If this is the case, what can be done about it by planners?

In discussing the changing role of the planner in today's society, Herbert Gans says,

...the outcomes of architectural and site planning, and of most policies which seek to change the 'physical' environment, have little impact on the behavior patterns and values of people. Planning which aims to improve living conditions must address itself to the significant causal elements of these conditions, which are usually economic, social, and political.¹

In the case of Towar Gardens, the problems are somewhat economically and physically oriented, but the real underlying causes are social and political--social ostricism and political inaction. Some have said that the social barrier between Towar Gardens and East Lansing could be bridged if only the physical wall between them were removed. This is doubtful, since the physical wall represents only a symbol of deeper feelings of antagonism and distrust. As Suzanne Keller says in a sociological analysis of the urban neighborhood: "...social solidarity and cooperation are less responsive to physical layout than planners would wish."²

In the political sphere, the ability to solve problems such as those found in Towar Gardens depends a great deal on the organizational structure of local government and, so far as the planner is concerned, where he fits into that organizational structure. One

¹Herbert J. Gans, People and Plans: Essays on Urban Problems and Solutions (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1968), pp. viii & ix.

²Suzanne Keller, The Urban Neighborhood: A Sociological Perspective (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 145.

of the greatest tests of that organizational structure is its ability to communicate effectively interdepartmentally, as well as with other governmental agencies and individual citizens and groups within the community. In respect to communication within the governmental structure, the planner can act effectively as a collector, synthesizer, and disseminator of information relating to observed problem situations. These information reports should not be limited to the usual planning documents of background studies, plans, or zoning revisions, but should also include reports on problems which need immediate attention, such as the short-range needs of the Towar Gardens community. In discussing this changing role of the planner, Herbert Gans says,

Physical determinism is...being replaced by a broader system approach which seeks to deal with the causes of the problem. In this conception of the planning process, land-use studies are less relevant, and...planners are turning to surveys of the present behavior and future wants of the population for whom they are planning, analyses of the quality of opportunities and social services now available to them, and economic as well as political studies to determine the feasibility and the consequences of the programs and policies they recommend.

This conception of planning also presages a change in the role of the planner. The city planner is no longer a nonpolitical formulator of long range ideals, but is becoming an advisor to elected and appointed officials, providing them with recommendations³ and technical information on current decisions.³

³Gans, op. cit., p. 69.

Thus, the planner should act as an advisor to the person or persons capable of making policy decisions involving the expenditure of resources, the providing of services, or the coordination of government agencies and action programs. The person to whom the planner should be responsible as a disseminator of information should be someone with authority to act on recommendations, or someone with enough influence to get a city council or township board to act.

The organizational structure of local government must also be conducive to encouraging and supporting citizen participation, the most important ingredient of communication, whether this organizational structure is the formal one set forth in a charter, or whether it is an informal working agreement. Community needs such as those found in the Towar Gardens area, in all likelihood, cannot be solved without the direct participation of the residents experiencing the problems. In fact, it is in cases such as this that citizen participation can be most fruitful because much more interest can be generated in people who know that plans or project proposals are going to affect them directly. Planners often chide the public for not participating in hearings for comprehensive plans or other general types of planning proposals. Such was the experience recently in Meridian Township where three public meetings

were held to discuss a proposed Development Policy Plan. Average attendance at these meetings was about twelve persons, while a recent public hearing concerning a proposed mobile home park in Meridian attracted over 150 persons. The lessons are obvious. People, for the most part, do not choose to participate unless they will be directly involved in, or affected by, some decision to be made. The possibility that a plan may have some effect on their lives sometime in the future is not enough; there must be, to borrow a phrase from another period in our history, a "clear and present danger" which could manifest itself as a problem situation in a short period of time.

The increased emphasis on citizen participation in recent years has come about chiefly through the efforts of two groups of people: the socially-aware planners and other government officials, and the previously "powerless" citizens who recognized that only through organized group action and protest would their needs be met by the majoritarian society. Many of these planners have discussed ways in which citizen participation can become more effective through cooperative efforts with local government officials, rather than a series of confrontations between the two groups as was the case in the Towar Gardens community. Harleigh Trecker says that in a democratic society, professional planners

...do not make the plans; rather they help people to make their own plans by giving aid to the process of planning. The professional worker must know the questions rather than the answers. A few of the questions are these; What are the needs? What is our function in relation to these needs? What are the most serious gaps, and the most acute problems? What are the resources? What coordination of effort is needed?⁴

The development of citizen participation is not as painful as some planners are led to believe. If it is approached in the right way, it can make the planner's job easier, as well as more fruitful. Talent banks of enthusiasm and keen perceptiveness about local problems and needs exist in even the most "disadvantaged" neighborhoods. These talents should be tapped by planners to enhance the potential for solving problems at the grass-roots level.

Before any of these efforts for increased problem-solving effectiveness, including better coordination of services and better communication through citizen participation, can be a reality, planners and other persons within the ranks of governmental officialdom must make a commitment--a commitment and willingness to scratch beneath the surface of the physical environment to root out those social and political problems which often are the primary causes of maladies, not only for past and present generations, but also for those children existing

⁴Ernest B. Harper and Arthur Durham (eds.), Community Organization in Action (New York: Association Press, 1959), p. 215.

and yet unborn who will be subjected to the very same problems in the future. The latent potential within each person is too valuable a resource to that individual and to society to be squandered because of hostilities and discriminatory actions directed towards a group of children whose only liability is that they live in the "wrong" neighborhood. This commitment also involves the realization that the needs of individual groups within a political unit must be met; to be complacent with the knowledge that most of the people in a community have access to those rights which are universal, particularly the right to be accepted for one's worth and not be rejected on the basis of false-image social ostracism, is not sufficient. The fact that any group, sub-group, or neighborhood is not afforded these universal rights should be sufficient reason to initiate actions to relieve the problems. Without a commitment to solve these problems, the future will not be very bright, indeed.

In summary, it can be said that the following efforts should be made by planners to alleviate problem situations such as those found in the Towar Gardens community. The planner should:

1. Make a commitment to help solve problem situations normally thought to be outside the realm of the "physical planner." This commitment involves trying to help solve the underlying causes, such as social ostracism and political inaction, of problem situations.

2. Be perceptive in recognizing the social problems of neighborhood groups within the community. These problems are often subtle and difficult to recognize.
3. Initiate and maintain open channels of communication between the government agency and citizen groups, as well as intergovernmentally. In this role, the planner should act as a collector, synthesizer, and disseminator of information.
4. Act as a staff advisor on special problems to political leaders. He should convince political leaders that a coordinated attack is necessary to solve perceived social problems.
5. Coordinate efforts of other groups capable of solving some facet of the problem situation. This includes coordinating government agencies as well as volunteer organizations.
6. Get whatever aid is necessary to solve the problem. This includes applying for appropriate federal and state aids, and soliciting for private donations and volunteer help.
7. Encourage citizen participation by letting people know that they can play the most substantial part themselves in determining their own destinies.
8. Act as an advocate for the people and their right to a decent physical and social environment.

The Towar Gardens experience holds many lessons for planners and other persons concerned with the quality of human life for all persons. It should be emphasized that this account has not been intended as, nor should it be construed as, an attack on any person or group of persons connected with any government agency or volunteer organization. What it has attempted to do is point out the inadequacies in the approach to

problem-solving found in most communities today, using a readily accessible case study for emphasis. Hopefully, it can also be used as a tool for helping the many people who are seeking to improve the quality of life in Towar Gardens.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books

- Beard, Charles A. and George H. E. Smith. The Old and the New. New York, The Macmillan Company, 1940.
- Biddle, William W. The Community Development Process: The Rediscovery of Local Initiative. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965.
- Bloomberg, Warner, Jr. and Henry J. Schmandt. Power, Poverty, and Urban Policy. Vol. 2, Urban Affairs Annual Reviews: Beverly Hills, California: Sage Publications, Inc., 1968.
- Brunt, Severyn T. Community in Action. New Haven: College and University Press, 1963.
- Cunningham, James V. The Resurgent Neighborhood. Notre Dame, Indiana: Fides Publications, Inc., 1965.
- Durant, Samuel W. History of Ingham and Eaton Counties Michigan. Philadelphia: D. W. Ensign and Company, 1880.
- Gans, Herbert J. People and Plans: Essays on Urban Problems and Solutions. New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1968.
- Greer, Scott. The Emerging City; Myth and Reality. New York: Glencoe Free Press, 1962.
- Hare, Paul A. Handbook of Small Group Research. New York: Glencoe Free Press, 1962.
- Harper, Ernest and Arthur Dunham. Community Organization in Action. New York: Associated Press, 1959.
- Hatt, Paul K. and Albert J. Reiss (eds.), Cities and Societies. New York: The Free Press, 1957.

- Hawley, Amos. Human Ecology: A Theory of Community Structure. New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1950.
- Keller, Suzanne. The Urban Neighborhood: A Sociological Perspective. New York: Random House, 1968.
- King, Clarence. Working With People in Community Action. New York: Association Press, 1965.
- Martin, Roscoe C., et. al. Decisions in Syracuse. New York: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1968.
- Mercer, Blain E. The American Community. New York: Random House, 1956.
- Neighborhood Improvement Projects. New York: National Federation of Settlements and Neighborhood Centers, 1953.
- Park, Robert Ezra. Human Communities. Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1953.
- Sower, Christopher, John Holland, Kenneth Tiedke, Walter Freeman. Community Involvement. Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1957.
- Sussman, Marvin B. (ed.). Community Structure and Analysis. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1959.
- Thelen, Herbert A. Dynamics of Groups at Work. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962.
- Towar, James D. History of the City of East Lansing. Written for the East Lansing Public Library, East Lansing, Michigan, 1933.
- Turner, John B. (ed.). Neighborhood Organization for Community Action. New York: National Association of Social Workers, 1968.
- Warren, Roland L. The Community in America. Chicago: Rand McNally, 1963.

Periodicals

AIP Newsletter, IV - 10 (October, 1969).

- Arnstein, Sherry R. "A Ladder of Citizen Participation," Journal of the American Institute of Planners, XXXV-4 (July, 1969), 216-224.
- Burke, Edmund M. "Citizen Participation Strategies," Journal of the American Institute of Planners, XXXIV-5 (September, 1968), 287-294.
- Cohen, Henry. "Social Surveys as Planning Instruments for Housing," Journal of Social Issues, VII-1 and 2 (1951), 35-46.
- Fried, Marc and Peggy Gleicher. "Some Sources of Residential Satisfaction in an Urban Slum," Journal of the American Institute of Planners, XXVIII (1961), 305-315.
- Gans, Herbert J. "The Balanced Community," Journal of the American Institute of Planners, XXVII-3 (August, 1961), 176-184.
- Hyman, Herbert H. "Planning with Citizens: Two Styles," Journal of the American Institute of Planners, XXXV-2 (March, 1969), 105-112.
- Mogulof, Melvin. "Coalition to Adversary: Citizen Participation in Three Federal Programs," Journal of the American Institute of Planners, XXXV-35 (July, 1969) 225-232.
- Rein, Martin. "Social Planning: The Search for Legitimacy," Journal of the American Institute of Planners, XXXV-4 (July, 1969), 233-244.
- Riemer, Svend. "Hidden Dimensions of Neighborhood Planning," Land Economics, XXVI-2 (May, 1950), 197-201.
- Rosow, Irving. "The Social Effects of the Physical Environment," Journal of the American Institute of Planners, XXVII-2 (May, 1961), 127-134.
- Ross, H. Lawrence. "The Local Community: A Survey Approach," American Sociological Review, XXVII-1 (February, 1962), 75-84.

Newspapers

Ingham County News, October 22, 1969-March 4, 1970.

Meridian Towne Courier, January 28, 1969-February 10, 1970.

The (Lansing) State Journal, March 18, 1969-December 8, 1969.

Publications of the Government and Other Organizations

Chadwick Farm Atlas of Ingham County Michigan. Ann Arbor, Michigan: C. W. Chadwick, 1914.

Spiegel, Hans B. and Stephen D. Mittenenthal. Neighborhood Power and Control: Implications for Urban Planning. New York: Institute for Urban Environment, School of Architecture, Columbia University, 1968.

United States Office of Economic Opportunity. Catalogue of Federal Domestic Assistance. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1969.

United States Office of Economic Opportunity. "Participation of the Poor in the Community Decision-Making Process." Washington: Government Printing Office, August, 1969.

United States Office of Economic Opportunity. "Planning for Community Action." Washington: Government Printing Office, 1968.

United States Bureau of the Census. United States Census of Population and Housing: 1960, Census Tracts. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1962.

United States Statutes at Large-1965. Public Law 89-10 - April 11, 1965, "Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965," Vol. 79. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1966.

Unpublished Materials

East Lansing Board of Education. "East Lansing Recreation Programs." 1969-1970. East Lansing, Michigan: 1969, (Mimeographed).

- Freeman, John C. "The Potential of Local Citizen Organization for Contributing to the Planning Decision Making Process." Unpublished Master's thesis, Michigan State University, 1966.
- Ingham County Health Department. "Project ECHO." Housing and Environmental Appraisal, preliminary data. Ingham County, Michigan: no date, (Mimeographed).
- Jennings, James M. "The Case of an Elementary Principal's Involvement with a School Community." Written for Sociology 868, Social Organization and Administration, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Fall, 1969.
- "Meridian Charter Township Nuisance Ordinance." Ordinance Number 18. Haslett, Michigan: Adopted April 15, 1958.
- Meridian Charter Township Planning Commission. "Housing and Environment: A Study of Structural Obsolescence and Environmental Blight in Meridian Charter Township." Haslett, Michigan: November, 1969.
- Meridian Charter Township Planning Commission. "Meridian Charter Township Population Study," Technical Memorandum Number 1, Preliminary Report. Haslett, Michigan: September, 1968.
- Meridian Charter Township Planning Commission. "Meridian Charter Township Economic Base Study," Technical Memorandum Number 2, Preliminary Report. Haslett, Michigan: November, 1968.
- Meridian Charter Township Planning Department. "Meridian Charter Township Existing Land Use Study," Technical Memorandum Number 3, Preliminary Report. Haslett, Michigan: December, 1968.
- Meridian Charter Township Planning Department. "Meridian Charter Township Natural Conditions Study," Technical Memorandum Number 4, Preliminary Report. Haslett, Michigan: December, 1968.
- Meridian Charter Township Planning Commission. "Outline-- Information and Communication Plan," Haslett, Michigan: No date (Mimeographed).
- Meridian Township Board. "Minutes." Haslett, Michigan: 1945-1970.

- Meridian Township Planning Commission. "Minutes."
Haslett, Michigan: 1958-1970.
- Meridian Township Zoning Board. "Minutes." Haslett,
Michigan: 1950-1958.
- North Side Community Action Center. "Opinion Survey."
Lansing, Michigan: November 14, 1968.
- Okemos Board of Education, Haslett Board of Education,
and Meridian Township. "School Park Agreement."
Haslett, Michigan: January 30, 1965, (Mimeo-
graphed).
- "Registration Book - Men and Women Electors," Meridian
Township, Ingham County, Precinct Number 2,
State of Michigan, 1928-1936.
- "Towar Gardens Community Leadership." A report prepared
for Urban Sociology, Michigan State University,
East Lansing, Michigan, Spring, 1969.

MAY 8 1969

MICHIGAN STATE UNIV. LIBRARIES



31293010575417