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priority, Cutler says, something the new mayor has communicated to all parties in his first few meetings with Ciminelli and the JSCB.

“One thing the mayor has made clear in those meetings, to Ciminelli and anyone else there, is that it’s a high priority for this administration to see this project succeed,” Cutler said. “All parties will see a comprehensive plan come out of this administration. And we expect everyone who has made past commitments to this project will live up to them.”

Coordinating with the big redevelopment projects is important, but the little community-based projects matter just as much, according to Cutler, and it is incumbent upon the administration to reach out to small community groups and individuals and support them in any way they can.

After all, every little bit helps, and there’s \$1 billion at stake: If we renovate Buffalo’s public schools but let the neighborhoods they occupy continue to slide into dilapidation, the schools will catch up with their surroundings sooner rather than later. What a waste that would be.

## MIRACLE ON LOMBARD ST.

A new block club fights back on the East Side

Lombard Street, just a few block’s from the Harriet Ross Tubman School, is one of those East Side streets that most people have given up on, and for obvious reasons. Two thirds of the houses are boarded up and empty, lending the street a creepy air, like a ghost town. The street goes completely dark as soon as dusk hits, making it hard to recall that it’s only a couple blocks from the grand old Central Terminal. Simply put, it’s a street that would usually be left to drug dealers and prostitutes.

But on a recent snowy evening, one house—number 18—stands out from the rest, shining like a beacon with the bright lights and Valentine’s decorations, of all things. It’s the home of Danny Wittkopp and Richard Maynard, the founders of the Lombard Street Block Club. Long-time residents of Lombard, Wittkopp and Maynard have been working for nearly a year—uniting neighbors and harassing City Hall—to turn the tide on Lombard Street, to reclaim what is rightfully theirs: the neighborhood.

It all started last spring when Maynard was out sweeping up garbage in front of their house. He decided to help out a disabled neighbor out by cutting his bushes. “He had his leg amputated, so he couldn’t do much,” Maynard says. “But his bushes were getting way out of hand, so I cut them back for him.” While he was at it, he figured he’d also get the bushes at the derelict house next door, so he cut them to the ground with a chainsaw. Curious neighbors wanted to know what was up. “It’s next to my property,” he told them, “and the owner clearly isn’t going to do anything about it, so I’m taking responsibility for it.”

Soon everyone on the street wanted his bushes cut, and the cleanup became a neighborhood effort. “The city had to come three days in a row to pick up all of the debris,” Wittkopp notes, with a satisfied smile.

That was only the beginning, though. With all the interest shown by their neighbors, Maynard and Wittkopp decided they should organize a block club. Maynard’s brother-in-law, already president of a block club in the Bailey-Kensington area, helped them fill out the necessary paperwork, and the first official meeting of the Lombard Street Block Club was August 1.

Since then they’ve accomplished a lot in a short amount of time, or at least they’ve prompted the city to do a lot, probably more than it has done in that area for decades. The two proudly tell *Artvoice* that the mayor’s complaint line receives so many calls from them that the operators now recognize their phone number. It certainly seems to be working. They’ve had abandoned vehicles towed out of backyards, gotten city workers in to clean up yards where weeds had grown six feet tall, had several houses on the street written into housing court and even successfully managed to get a few houses demolished and a local methamphetamine lab raided.

While there are bigger projects, Wittkopp and Maynard understand that little things can make a big difference—having porch lights installed along the length of the street, simply whitewashing an abandoned house, helping neighbors access loans and grants to improve their properties. Slowly they are making these things happen.

That’s not to say that it’s easy going on Lombard Street. Maynard and Wittkopp say the block club’s active membership is down right now, and bad weather isn’t the only reason. “When the winter weather hit, we dropped from about 25 active members to 10 or so,” Maynard says. “But we’ve also had problems with drug dealers moving onto the street and harassing people in our group. That’s what caused some of them to back out.”

Maynard and Wittkopp have already seen Lombard Street decline for 11 years, and with it their dreams and quality of life. “When we moved in, the neighborhood was a lot better. Even if we were to sell today, what would we get, \$1,000?”

The way they see it, all they have left is to fight back. And with the city’s cooperation, people like Maynard and Wittkopp can win their fights, all across the East Side.

—peter koch