John Butterworth

Where: Charleston Urban Renewal Authority Offices

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John Butterworth has been a neighborhood planner with the City of Charleston Planning Dept. for about four years. In this interview, he speaks about the history of Charleston's West Side in terms of how the city's plans and redlining impacted the neighborhood, the West Side of the present, and the city's plans for the future of the neighborhood. He also shared his personal approach to city planning.

Butterworth was interviewed by producer Aaron Henkin with Emily Hilliard as part of the *Out of the Blocks* podcast's two episodes on Charleston's West Side. Learn more: https://wvfolklife.org/2020/01/17/out-of-the-blocks-podcast-highlights-charlestons-west-side-west-virginia-folklife-hosts-listening-party-february-12/

JB: John Butterworth

AH: Aaron Henkin
EH: Emily Hilliard

John Butterworth 0:00 My name is John Butterworth. I'm a neighborhood planner with the City of Charleston Planning Department. I've been working in this role for about four years.

Aaron Henkin 0:08 And tell me about your work as it as, as...tell me sort of how you've crossed paths with the West Side and just sort of how much of your work is involved in concentrating on it?

John Butterworth 0:19 Sure, it's, it's taken a lot of my time, mostly because the community's been so organized. And, you know, the as, as a planner, you're, you're not there to be the advocate. You're there to try to help empower people who are trying to, you know, get the, you know, a park in their neighborhood or, or, you know, work on litter cleanups or just different sort of quality life stuff. So the West Side is a really organized place. It's, it's a place where people care deeply, you know, and that, that cuts across folks that have lived there for 40 years, or their entire life, and new residents, right? Everyone seems to be really passionate. So when that sort of passion just kind, of kind of crops up that, that gives me as a person who's trying to connect all those dots a lot to work with. And that's been a really happy thing over the last four years that I've been working. So recently, the West Side is taken a lot of my time. And that's, that's been a great, great problem to have.

Aaron Henkin 1:22 You're, you seem to be a student of history, a student of maps, just give me sort of a thumbnail history lesson on...I mean a lot of people are going to be listening to this, never been to Charleston. So talk about sort of where West Side fits into the picture of Charleston as a whole, historically.

John Butterworth 1:42 Sure, Charleston was founded on the on the East Side of the Elk River, right? So the West Side was, was literally the, you know, the plantation or farmland of early Charleston, not part of the incorporated city. That changed when bridges crossed the Elk. And you had basically five large plantations, slaveholding plantations on the West Side, that transitioned, you know, at different paces to, to higher levels of development. And that happened with Elk City, which was an independent municipality closest to the Elk River, before it got annexed into Charleston proper, just before the turn of the century. And so, over time, sort of development worked its way west, for the most part. You had really prominent industries, like the Kelly Axe plant, which was at one point, the largest axe foundry in the country, on the West Side employed, you know, you know, many, many scores people. So that sort of growth, you know, it has a lot of variety. And, and you see that in the development pattern on the West Side. You've got a great set of grids, you know, grided streets, which are the hallmark of, you know, kind of consistent and methodical development, and then the whole neighborhood takes a big kink, right? The whole grid system just takes it takes a kink. And it's clear that there was, there was several different points of gravity and growth happening on the West Side over time. So it's, it's been, I think, largely a working class neighborhood, its entire existence. The Kelly Axe plant. You know, there's the history of, of, of redlining, that started in the middle '30s. Charleston's red line maps were produced in 1937. So we have that history here. And there were definitely areas on the West Side that were redlined. Having looked back through through the area descriptions from that time period, the areas on the West Side don't seem to have been redlined for racial animus reasons. They were industrial, right? They were they were often lower-quality housing or bordered by railroads, and the Axe plant and the things that we associate with, you know, neighborhoods that have more challenges. And so nonetheless, that history has been been sticking around on the West Side for a long time.

Aaron Henkin 4:16 People hear the term redlining all the time, just, just for clarification purposes, describe what that policy is, and just sort of how it ends up being sort of an act of racial aggression.

John Butterworth 4:30 Sure. So it... I guess, like any policy, the devil's in the details, right? At its beginning, redlining was basically an insurance pool. You know, it was the idea that the 30-year mortgage should exist, right? Because if we, if we make homeowners out of every American, they won't be communists, right? (laughs) So, so we have to make, we have to make housing affordable, and the best way to do that is to guarantee loans. And so the federal government decided they should get in that business. And like any good insurance pool, they wanted to mitigate their risk, and the way that they tried to do that was to create what they called housing security maps. And those maps, often red lined communities for, for legitimate reasons like I said--industry or, or proximity to rail or just low quality housing, not access to public sewers, those sorts of things. But they also had, you know, deeply, you know, xenophobic and racial bias criteria in there as well. And so, you, you, you see that the lasting legacy was that often communities of color were totally frozen out of the credit market. And that's, that's one of the things that you see in all communities that had these red line maps produced is that the areas that were redlined whether it for racial animus reasons or for maybe legitimate reasons, just infrastructure or otherwise, the disinvestment is true across the board. Right. And it's a, it's a sad legacy in our nation's history. It's something that I don't think we come to terms with often enough.

Aaron Henkin 6:13 Paint a picture today of I mean, do you happen to know ballpark, sort of like what the vacancy rates are? I mean, we've been talking all week with people in the neighborhood about the number of vacants. The work that's been done to level some of them, and then we met like, Bob Hardy, I don't know if you know him. Who is, you know, we met him on a day when he was in working on doing a gut rehab of a duplex over there. Talk about the the housing stock, the housing situation over there right now.

John Butterworth 6:46 Sure. It...really like I said, the West Side varies, block by block. You've got some areas that are still have really good bones right? They're you know, they were higher-quality structures when they were built in the '20s and '30s, right, and so they've aged better. You've got other areas where the housing stock wasn't quite as good even in the first place. It was very low rent, sort of economy housing for workers in the 20s, and 30s. So those structures, just plain old haven't aged as well. And you've got issues because of, you know, the legacy of redlining, right? That contributes to disinvestment, we've got, you know, rampant industrial decline in Appalachia, generally speaking, and, and that's very true with the Kanawha Valley. So, you know, this sort of deferred maintenance that keeps the structure, you know, habitable for 8,9, 10, decades (laughs) really hasn't been done for a lot of structures in the neighborhood. So, you know, whether the owner was, had the best of intentions or not, when, when water starts getting in structures, sometimes they're too far gone. And so that's, that's why the city is, I think, had to have a pretty robust demolition program is because when you have, you know, a homeowner, you know, more than likely a widow living in a structure. And next door, there's a house that is absolutely falling down around itself, it's being broken into, you know, the number one thing we can do to protect her life and safety and the property values of our properties to try to remove the blight. And so I think that at this stage, you know, the city's, you know, really proactively looking at at the more positive response, that's a negative response. Right. we've, we've, gotten to a point where, you know, if the only intervention you can have is a demolition, you're, you know, to me personally, just personally, that's a loss. It's a loss for the neighborhood, it's a loss for that family that lived there and raised their kids there. It, it's, it really does break my heart every time we see it. But I think in order to, in order to make good on the people that have given their lives and their livelihoods to the home that they own on the West Side, that's that's probably one of the necessary evils.

Aaron Henkin 9:12 I wonder how you...I wonder if you might talk about the the skepticism that longtime residents of the West Side have toward the city government and whatever efforts it may have to, you

know, with, with some sort of revitalization initiative or the other. I mean, we talked with a guy who went to Dunbar School today, back when it was a segregated school, and then, and he lived, he's lived his entire life cross the street, and he saw the city turn that school into like a parking lot for its power equipment. And, you know, I think that ... all this is just to ask the question like, talk to me about the skepticism of West Side residents and, you know, whether that's well founded and how you how you deal with that skepticism in 2019?

John Butterworth 10:15 Sure (sighs) that skepticism exists for a reason. And it has (sighs) you know, I've had long conversations with, you mentioned, Bob, and lots of other folks on the West Side. And I mean, I think personally, when I'm trying to talk to someone, you know, just across the table, like we are now is, is to say, you know, I got here as soon as I could, and I'm going to do everything within my power to hear what you're saying, and do differently if that's what needs to be done. I mean, the history, I think, pretty well speaks for itself, and Charleston is, sadly no different than a lot of other communities that have experienced things like redlining and the history of urban renewal, and the displacement caused and the families that were that were up ended by all that. You know, the businesses Charleston had a very vibrant African American business district, and that's not--you can see very small little remnants of it today. And the skepticism, (sighs) the skepticism is there for a reason. And I think the best we can do today is to listen to people and their experience and their, their memory of how that was and to say, okay, what would you do, you know, if you were in my shoes and, and that sort of listening is I think, becoming much more common. I'm trying to make that much more common. I know, many other city leaders are, but you know, I (sighs) I don't have a magic wand. And I really wish I did.

Aaron Henkin 12:00 You must have a really interesting job, because there's the, there's the work that you do connecting with people in the community. And then there's the work that you do, connecting with the politicians and everybody in the, you know, headquarters, main office, City Hall--that's part of your world as well. That's got to be an interesting kind of tightrope to walk. I wonder, what, if you might talk about the larger political will to pay attention to the West Side?

John Butterworth 12:29 Sure. It's changed really drastically, you know, the new mayoral administration is, is, I think, taking a very different view, than maybe has been done historically. And, and my wife, when we were in school, together, after we first met, she bought me a great book about community planning in the Pacific Northwest in the 70s. And the title of that book is Gorillas in the Bureaucracy. And it was just this idea that, you know, planners specifically, but you know, bureaucrats, generally speaking, you know, they, they are in positions of speaking to both of those, those audiences, right? You've got the, the, you know, the folks and you've got the political leaders. And, you know (sighs) I don't know if this can always be true, but I do think that doesn't have to be a relationship of animosity or relationship of, of tension. Right? You know, I do think that, that those people all put together in a room will want the same things, it's, it's often just a difference in how we do that. And the means that, to that end. I have not personally experienced a lot of tension between elected leaders in Charleston and the people on the ground. I think there is a lot more consensus here than then, then you generally would think. I think the difference is often in the details. And I think one of the things is...maybe I'll wax on our national condition or anything like that, but, you know, we need to we need to get back to a place where you can say, listen, we agree on 80% of those ideas! Let's move forward on 80%. And that's what I've been really trying to do because I, you know, you know, political realities aside or or just, you know, scarce public dollars, whatever it may be, you have to, you have to be able to say, okay, let's do the good work we can at this moment, you know, and, and that's what I'm here to do. And I really have had great interactions with all our political leaders, I think, by and large, you know. That's, that's... Charleston is a big small town. And I think that because of that, you know, all our elected officials are you know, you will see them in the grocery store, you will see them, you know, grabbing a cup of coffee. They are not insulated. And that's, that's, I think, the way democracy is supposed to work.

Aaron Henkin 15:11 I'm gonna, I'm gonna let Emily ask a few questions too. But my last one for me, from right now is like, like, what are you working on right now in terms of what's going on on the West Side? And like what's, what's your hope for, like, immediate improvements on the West Side? And like, what's your, your best case scenario for 5-10 years down the road on the West Side?

John Butterworth 15:38 Sure. Yeah. So the the city recently just created a land reuse agency and they are often called land banks. They're there, they're not... this is one of those things where West Virginia is actually not behind the curve on. I think there are only nine other states that actually enable land banks, generally speaking. So we were able to create one, we were able to just participate in our first tax sale and purchase abandoned properties. You know, not, not anybody's home, not anybody's place where they're living. We believe them all to be vacant at this point, we're trying to clean out the stuff that people have truly just walked away from. And that-- that sort of, that sort of disinvestment is different than then, you know, an elderly person living in a home that they just can't keep up with anymore. I do think that, that we, we have some stuff that we can use to better address those instances. But until recently, until, until the adoption of the land reuse program, we really didn't have any way to address properties that folks had just walked off of. And that that sort of legal sewer drain that these properties were just circling around greatly contributes to the kind of things that we call blight. You know, those are properties that are not maintained, that the city might have had to intervene and demolish, like we talked about. And they're the places that, you know, folks without a home might try to get into in cold weather and maybe accidentally catch it on fire. And then we've got, you know, folks, you know, with a with a burning structure right next door, that--that's terrifying. And I've talked to residents who lose sleep at night over those sort of concerns. And we are beginning to address that. And I think that, you know, urban renewal authorities, generally speaking, are our solution disinvestment and blight circa 1950. Right? Land reuse authorities don't have the power of eminent domain, they don't want them. They want to work with communities, they want to ask people what they want, and try to deliver. And so I'm very optimistic that we can do some good work with that. It's not a silver bullet. You know, this disinvestment occurred over at least the last 40 years, maybe longer. It's not going to be solved overnight. But until we start dealing with those, those truly abandoned properties, we're not going to make much headway.

Emily Hilliard 18:17 So we interviewed Thomas Toliver, and he mentioned that, I believe CURA gave him land or allowed him to use that land? I wonder if you have any comments about him or that project he's working on?

Aaron Henkin 18:31 You can also explain what CURA is. That sounds like an acronym.

John Butterworth 18:35 So CURA, CURA, CURA is the Charleston Urban Renewal Authority and they're a traditional urban renewal authority in the sense that they, legally speaking, do have the power of eminent domain, even though I don't believe they've used it in 20 or 25 years. But they are the agency that oversaw Charleston's era of urban renewal, you know. So, you've probably heard people talk about the Triangle District and the area that is now the Town Center Mall. That was a vibrant community of color in the, you know, 40s 50s and 60s and when urban renewal came to Charleston, that, that area was made available for development. And so, but Sir Tom, as he likes to call himself, is a really inspirational guy. He may have told you but he was talking to some children and asked them where I can't remember what vegetable it was, but where vegetables come from, and he, they said Kroger and he was he was just heartbroken by that. So he's just made gardening and sharing vegetables with the community just part of his passion. And it's infectious. I mean, he's, he's, you know, in his mid-80s now and I guarantee he can garden around any one of us. His work with, especially with he calls them street people. But he, he really has never met a stranger and wants to hear about people's story and why they are, where they are at that very moment. And, and he doesn't really make any judgments about that. And I think that's the lesson that everybody can learn from Tom. He's really inspirational in that regard.

Emily Hilliard 20:24 We also spoke with a gentleman today who mentioned a soccer stadium plan for the West Side? Could you if you do have information, could you speak about that, and then any specific projects that are planned for the West Side?

John Butterworth 20:40 No, I, that's the first time I've ever heard of a soccer complex! So the CURA has been working for the past year on an urban renewal plan, which is really just a planning document to say, here's what we think would be helpful to solve some of the community's issues and, and this, this current draft plan has focused a lot on dilapidated housing and abandoned properties, and all those sorts of things. I do think that that plan calls for, I think they call it a sport field, but I don't think it a soccer arena or anything. It's a, you know, some portion of a city block that they said, the, the community lost a bunch of green open space when Cabell Field became the Mary C Snow Elementary. And so that was a big hunk of green space in the middle of a very, you know, tight little urban neighborhood. And so I think the plan was trying to say, hey, you know, some green space is probably something the neighborhood needs. As far as plans for the West Side, I think that, you know, the urban renewal plan is currently in draft form and is before City Council. But that plan has, I think, a lot of good concepts. One thing that I've learned is that urban renewal of the 60s and 70s and 80s, was very sort of master plan based, right? They kind of depicted this whole, you know, we're gonna take this whole city block and knock down this house and renovate this house and displace poor Miss Johnson and what you know, whatever it was. That's not the way redevelopment happens, at least not these days. It's much more organic, you know, with the land reuse program that we're trying to build now. We want to be able to respond to you know, abandonment when it occurs. Right? So if someone walks off from a property, we want to intervene. But if they don't, let's figure out how to keep them there and make their lives better. So I think that sort of nimble approach where, you know, we're not trying to master plan a community, we're not trying to tell them who they need to be. We're trying to respond to instances of blight where they happen. And if that's a, you know, house that tragically catches on fire and needs to be demolished because it's, you know, mostly burned, we need to we need to jump in. If it's a vacant lot that the house is long gone, you know, right now we're working on big ideas about how we try to make reinvestment the right choice there. Right now, Charleston's in a pretty challenging real estate market. And so reinvestment just really doesn't pencil, you know. It costs more to build than what you could ever hope to get out of that property. And how we shift that needle is really difficult. And so we're, we know, we're looking at every possible solution. Can we bring other grant funds to the table, can we, you know, conglomerate properties so there may be a little more buildable than a, you know, very modest, 25-foot city lot, maybe we can make that a 50-foot lot, and now it's workable. So I think everything's on the table. But, you know, what, what the neighborhood, I think needs is more people committed to its success. And, you know, the, I think one of the things that doesn't get talked about enough on the West Side is that from a population perspective, it's really shrunk. You know, Charleston has generally and so when people think about Charleston and its glory days, you know, of the 70s or 80s. You know, we were a much bigger place. And part of that, part of that success of local businesses and vibrant neighborhoods was because we had more people. And attracting people to be here is I think the number one priority.

Emily Hilliard 24:30 How do you personally interact with the West Side?

John Butterworth 24:34 Well, you know, I go to some neighborhood watch meetings and some neighborhood association meetings and, you know, I think technically, you know, ex officio member on a board here and there, that sort of stuff. I think the most effective thing that I've ever done is hopped in someone's car and they said, I need to go show you something. And go for a ride and you will learn more in that hour or two then then you can in, and, you know, I'm a data nerd. I love maps. I can dig into census data with the best of them. But that's only good for the macro stuff, right? You can only understand, you know, you know, the sort of economic trends that you're up against, or what the real estate market's doing. But, you know, riding around in somebody's pickup truck that's got a bullet hole in the tailgate--that that's, that's how you understand a neighborhood and any chance I get to do that, that's, that's the best way.

Because you hear about not just what people are concerned about, but what they're really happy about, you know? You realize, you find out where they're, you know, their, their church friends live and, and you know, where they grew up, you know, it might be two blocks over or something. And those sort of stories are why they care about the neighborhood. And frankly, they're why I should care about that neighborhood.

Emily Hilliard 25:56 What about just in your downtime--shopping, eating, contra dancing? What takes you over there?

John Butterworth 26:04 Yeah, so no, I maybe it was blatant self-dealing, but through work helping organize contra dances, we got them on the West Side now. So they're Bream Memorial. And it's a great, great old church that has a wonderful activities building, which is where most folk dancing seems to happen. So you know, we bring that over there. FOOTMAD [Friends of Old Time Music and Dance] is also working on a big event in this coming April to bring an African dance troupe of children to Charleston, and they're going to be doing a set of programming at Stonewall Jackson Middle and have a bunch of students from all over Kanawha County there. And so that-- that's the kind of stuff that, you know, that sort of community, you know, just what...I read a book where the author would call that social infrastructure, you know it was this real funny term about just connectedness of people. And when you run into folks, and when you see them at a dance, or you run into them, you know, that book was was making the statement that, frankly, you care more, and that increases everyone's quality of life, right down to life expectancy, or, you know, surviving a natural crisis or something like that. And I do believe in that stuff. I think that, I think that our ability to, to stick together when when the going gets tough is what makes a good neighborhood. And yeah, I hope that people feel stickier, you know, in years to come than they do now.

Aaron Henkin 27:53 I'm gonna ask you one more question. And I think Wendell is probably going to show up soon. What little kid says, like, I want to grow up and be a city planner? How did you get into this? Did you play a lot of SimCity when you were a kid?

John Butterworth 28:10 I did play SimCity, yeah. I played a lot of SimCity on Windows 95. And it was one of those really weird sort of happenstance things. So speaking to my data nerd cred. I was, I just graduated college, and I was working for the school doing camps and conferences, in band camps and church camps. So I was sitting there, in my dorm room for the summer, and I got on the Bureau of Labor Statistics. And I looked at careers that were going to see growth or something like that some article that they had posted on there. And city planning was one of them. And I thought, huh, okay, you know, so I walked into my, my boss, and she was one of those people that took being a mentor really seriously. And I plopped down on her couch in her office. And I said, do you know anybody in city planning? And she held up a finger and dialed the phone and we, I think the next night we're sitting down to dinner with a very close friend of hers that was a city planner, and was working in Economic Development at the time for the city of Pittsburgh, but after that meeting, I was like, well, that's something I can really do. And so went and did a little more school and it just so happened, you know, West Virginia is not a place where you think of cities period, or planning very often, but there's a real vibrant kind of growth in all sorts of little nooks and crannies of West Virginia where people are saying, you know, what we can we can we can do better by our community if we think about it. And I think that's the basis of city planning. And it's, that's one of the things that just really attracted to me in the first place. And I guess I'm still doing it because I still have a job and you know, at the end of the day, you got to eat!

Aaron Henkin 30:00 You talk about your data nerd credentials. Talk to me about what this career has... how do you think this job has changed you as a person? I mean, it seems like ostensibly a job like this is a lot about data and numbers. But it seems like the better you get at it, the more you realize it's about, much squishier things.

John Butterworth 30:24 Yeah, that one of the, I've actually thought about this a little bit, a little bit recently. And, you know, urban planning, generally speaking, is a very geographic-based discipline, it's about where stuff is in relationship to other stuff. And, you know, I spent a lot of time working with maps and, you know, looking at (laughs) the city and the West Side from the air, you know. And I think what I've thought about recently is an interview I heard with uh... neuroscientists, I think, and she was talking about the relationship of spatial thinking, and how it's really just all network connections, right? You're all, you're connecting things through time and distance. And I think that, that that relationship of geography and the relationship of, of, places, to me is just intrinsically tied to the people that are that are there. And so when I look at a map of the West Side, you know, I see all the data nerd stuff where you, you know, you have, you know, blight condition surveys and census tracts, and, you know, and zoning districts and all the things that city planners geek out about. But you know, I, you know, I think of that as like, oh, that's Katie's block or, or that's where, that's where Tom lives, you know, and having that person-level view of the neighborhood to essentially be a whole other overlay over that same map, I think is one of the things that I hope makes me better at my job.

32:08

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