

# NEW WWW



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## Building Up The West Side: Cooperation is the way!

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### Introduction

A current tour of the West Side (Charleston, West Virginia) would reveal block after block of abandoned and blighted structures. Dark, shadowing corners, high grass, and debris covering the ground. The landscape hides the true beauty of the people who reside here. Today, a significant portion of Charleston's African American population resides on the West Side. These neighborhoods have strong working families, deeply involved leaders, and organizations all fighting to hold things together while building it up at the same time.



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### In fact...

...the conditions here have been a point of contention for quite some time. Despite a valiant resistance from the community, the demise of the 'Triangle' was ultimately successful, in part because city officials saw it as a slum—an eyesore for the city. A similar perception of the West Side persists today, setting the table for gentrification and possible future dispossession. But organizing and creating economic and social opportunity through cooperation offers a way forward. Cooperative businesses are owned and controlled by the people who use the business. Co-ops adhere to seven cooperative principles—voluntary participation; democratic member control; economic independence; autonomous control; education, training and information; cooperation among cooperatives; and concern for community. Creating opportunity for people and businesses practicing these principles can help our community and economy thrive from the grassroots up.



"Cooperation is the way we build ourselves, our children and our communities into what we know they have potential to be. So why are cooperative business models important for us to apply here on the West Side?" said Ed Whitfield, the co-director of the Fund for Democratic Communities. "The short answer is that investing in worker-owned small businesses and community owned assets focused on solving the problems that meet needs unique to this community, can have the effect of creating many forms of wealth that remain accessible and in the hands of the people who live here."

In 2015, when speaking about the conditions in Charleston for African Americans, Reverend Matthew J. Watts stated, "Many children today are born into communities where there is not only a shortage of money, but there is a poverty of the environment in which they are growing up in. They're in schools which are perpetually underperforming. There is drug and substance abuse at unprecedented levels. So there are a lot of other challenges that poor children are facing today that we didn't face at the same magnitude [50+ years ago]." For these reasons, Rev. Watts believed that there must be intervention from outside forces and groups to help improve the quality of the environment within our community. "We need to tap into a deeper sense of resiliency and for that, we must have hope. A hope that tomorrow will be better than today because there is trust that there is a support system working to make tomorrow better than today," Watts continued.



## Rather than waiting primarily for outside investments...

...cooperative business models and mindsets may just be that self-help force we need.

Our community's history is important context to today's circumstance. Charleston's African American population began to grow in the early twentieth century, in their escape from the Jim Crow south or when coal employment in nearby areas went bust. When Black people arrived in Charleston, they clustered in certain areas of the city--not because they wanted to, but because of rigid state-endorsed segregation. The Triangle District, for example, became an entertainment and commercial center for white and Black people alike, as music, whiskey by the drink, and other temptations brought people from near and far. Black professionals and Black-owned businesses operated in the Triangle and the nearby "Block" area on Shrewsbury Street. Today, this area would be Downtown surrounding the Charleston Towncenter Mall and the areas near the Capital Market. The Block was more than just a street of businesses—it was a mindset, a deep sense of community and togetherness that made "The Block" special and solidified the community's foundation. A 2019 article by Stan Bumgardner of the WV Daily Mail states "Prior to the 1950s, this area was bustling with restaurants, stores and hotels — run by African-Americans for African-Americans.... The people who lived in The Block formed personal bonds that seem almost nonexistent in today's technologically connected but interpersonally disconnected world."



At the same time, segregation and the broader systems of racism it upheld held back wealth-building opportunities for Black community members. National housing policies kept out the advantageous mortgage financing that allowed white-only suburbs to flourish from areas like the Triangle and Wertz Avenue. The local real estate industry kept Black people from moving into white neighborhoods. Local industrial employers refused to hire Black workers, and those that did permitted little advancement into higher-paying roles. Still, Black people in Charleston pooled resources and made the best out of what was available.



For example, in the 1960s, after successful civil disobedience campaigns eliminated discrimination in public places throughout the city, dozens of community groups like the Triangle Improvement Council, the Inter-City Council of Neighborhoods, and the United Neighborhood Interest Organization Network organized to meet the needs of their neighborhoods and to demand their share of city resources. The Hilltop Improvement League, an interracial group of low-income people in Coal Branch Heights, banded together to get their roads paved and nearly succeeded in obtaining federal money to replace dilapidated housing.

Unfortunately, Coal Branch Heights faced opposition from local and state governments which did not want to spend money on providing safe water to the community, tanking their project. Similar stories took place across Charleston (the whole country, in fact). At the peak of local organizing for neighborhoods, the city, state, and federal governments demolished the Triangle District, uprooting people who had lived there for their entire lives. Some people received relocation services; some didn't.



These lack of people-centered policies and actions stripped families and our community of decades of hard work and savings, and to date have not been compensated for what was taken from them. While it cannot right the wrongs of the past, programs and policies that pave the way for cooperatives can empower people to meet their economic and social needs and reap the profits generated by their dedicated work and services.

### **Phat Daddy's Cooperatively Owned Start-up take out restaurant**

Phat Daddy's LLC formed in 2020 by Cameron and Octavia Cordon, and daughter, Azelah Cordon. Their desire is to operate a family-owned cooperative business that will not only leave a legacy for their family but for future members of the community as well. Their mission is to provide a great dining experience for every customer by not only providing fast, delicious food, but expanding opportunities for ownership deep-rooted in the community. The cooperative will hire directly from the heart of the West Side, providing pathways to ownership for those that have struggled with drug use or have been previously incarcerated. The cooperative will leverage Cameron's 20 plus years of cooking and managing in the food industry to build a strong foundation for the business. Through Octavia's work directing the Aspire Achievement Project—which provides care packages of food and supplies to college students, SAT and ACT test preparation, as well as voter engagement and education for young men and women in the Charleston area—she has established deep connections with other community leaders.

“Cooperative businesses were never a part of my vocabulary until about a year ago. I then became eager to learn more about this system to see why I had not heard of it. Surprisingly, I not only had a desire to learn more but desired to become a part of the cooperative world,” Octavia said. “After sharing this wonderful opportunity with my family, we all agreed that this would not only be a great opportunity for us but for our community as well. Through the process of learning, consultations and planning for our new business, we are excited for the completion of our project. Our vision as a cooperative is to build a strong commitment to our community and focus on strengthening the West Side of Charleston.”

Phat Daddy's becoming a successful cooperative business means that direct community support is more likely to increase in activity. With assistance from the New Economy Works WV Cooperative Loan Fund, Phat Daddy's is scheduled to open its doors located at 480 Railroad Avenue, Charleston, WV 25302, in early February 2021.





A 2014 white paper by Jessica Gordon Nembhard explains that cooperative businesses have lower failure rates than traditional corporations and small businesses, after the first year of startup, and after 5 years in business. About 10% of cooperatives fail after the first year while 60-80% of traditional businesses fail after the first year. After 5 years, 90% of cooperatives are still in business, while only 3 – 5% of traditional businesses are still operating after 5 years. This is often because of the many people involved in starting a cooperative and the high level of community support for cooperatives (World Council of Credit Unions study in Williams 2007).

Cooperative businesses stabilize communities because they are community-based business anchors; and distribute, recycle, and multiply local expertise and capital within a community. They pool limited resources to achieve a critical mass. They enable their owners to generate income, and jobs, and accumulate assets; provide affordable, quality goods and services; and develop human and social capital, as well as economic independence (Gordon Nembhard 2002, 2004b, 2008a, 2014; Fairbairn et al 1991; Logue and Yates 2005; WAGES no date; Yes! Magazine 2013). In addition, co-op enterprises and their members pay taxes, and are good citizens by giving donations to their communities, paying their employees fairly, and using sustainable practices (Gordon Nembhard 2013; Iowa Association of Electrical Co-ops. 2011).

Let's take a moment to analyze the economic impact of the West Side on the City of Charleston's economy and workforce derived from pre-2020 Census data (<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/charlestoncitywestvirginia>).

The West Side holds an abundance of economic potential. The West Side is home to 35 percent of Charleston's residents, and one-quarter of Charleston's workforce. One-third of Charleston businesses are located on the West Side, yet only accounts for 20 percent of Charleston's payroll. What if, instead of the profits generated by our community being extracted to outside investors, we invested in cooperatives to return the profits to those who create it?

What if that economic activity were channeled into group economics with business models that inherently embody all of the good qualities our communities displayed back on "The Block"? Together, we can put ourselves in the best position to not only replicate those results, but far exceed them.

For more information about cooperatives or New West Virginia, visit [seedcommons.org](http://seedcommons.org).

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