Impact Circle Rationale for Geographic Focus Areas: 
UM-Flint Projects Connected with the Imagine Flint Master Plan 
As of 1/9/15

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The Imagine Flint Master Plan for a Sustainable Flint is a visionary blueprint for planning and development in Flint, MI over the coming decades. Formally adopted in October 2013, it is the first Master Plan that Flint has embraced since 1960 and it comprehensively addresses all aspects of city life.

The Master Plan presented an opportunity for all institutions in the Flint area to strategically rethink and adjust the way they approach community engagement. The City of Flint and the Master Plan itself call on institutions in Flint to align partnerships and initiatives with the Plan in order to realize this ambitious and necessary community vision for the future.

Impact Circle: Rethinking “Business as Usual” in UM-Flint Community Engagement

The University of Michigan-Flint has been recognized for its commitment to, infrastructure for and practice of community engagement. In 2010, UM-Flint received the prestigious designation as a Carnegie Classified in Community Engagement higher education institution after a rigorous application process. In 2012, our campus was selected by Michigan Campus Compact for the first Engaged Campus of the Year Award.

In 2019, UM-Flint will re-apply for the Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement and institutional reaccreditation. Now is the time to respond to local and national expectations for our community engagement to be more community-transforming, impact-oriented, mutually-reinforcing (not just mutually-beneficial) and enhancing the learning of all partners (community, students, faculty and staff). Diversity and inclusion, cultural humility, and social justice are inherent values of this engagement approach.

In order to achieve this more inspiring and challenging way of engaging and contributing, UM-Flint must set a new standard for business as usual. In 2014, the Office of University Outreach launched the Impact Circle for Master Plan Implementation for several interlocking purposes:

- To support the campus in shifting from scattershot or piecemeal community engagement activities to transformational community impacts
- To galvanize research, academic service-learning and other university connections and assets to support Master Plan implementation efforts
- To foster interdisciplinary collaboration and address complex community issues requiring interdisciplinary solutions
- To position UM-Flint as the academic partner of choice in the region

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Interest in the Impact Circle and more intentional modes of community engagement continues to grow as students, faculty, and staff learn about the Master Plan, and see possibilities in it for their own scholarship, networks, and legacies in the Flint community.

**Charting a Course for Deeper Impact**

In order to realize UM-Flint’s potential to generate transformational change through partnerships, the campus has to confront a few tough realities and continue to strengthen the campus culture regarding community engagement:

- **Deeper engagement means investing in place.** We have to start somewhere. By leveraging existing relationships in disinvested areas of Flint, we can more efficiently move forward in/with the community to bring about sustainable change and learning. While we do not have the capacity to invest deeply everywhere at the same time, we can find ways to share lessons learned as broadly as possible in many other high-need areas of the city.

- **Deeper engagement requires more intentional, focused coordination and institutional will.** Leadership and alignment at all levels is critical. Tenure and promotion guidelines must value, reward, and count community-engaged teaching, research, and programming. Service-learning (i.e. real-world service projects embedded in classes and integrally tied to class learning outcomes) must be infused and scaffolded throughout UM-Flint academic programs, so that students are prepared to experience sophisticated real-world projects before graduating. The University must incentivize interdisciplinary scholarship in order to generate holistic, triple bottom line results.

- **UM-Flint needs to have a stronger, committed presence and relationships at the neighborhood level outside of the downtown Flint area.**

- **To be a trusted partner, we must have more welcoming doorways for people to come into campus.** Faculty, students and staff must also be willing to go through doorways throughout the city.

- **We must have shared language and learn how to generate collective impact.**

- **We must learn how to build the capacity of grassroots organizations to work effectively with faculty and students, while at the same time building our own capacity to work effectively with grassroots organizations.** That is part of what being mutually-reinforcing is all about.

- **In the meantime, we’ll need to start by focusing partnership efforts in places with established anchor organizations that are authentically engaged with community members around the Master Plan.** Experience has shown that anchor partners are invaluable for ensuring the success of most UM-Flint partnership efforts. This is because their experience enables all parties to
spend more time on the actual work together than learning the process of how to work together. Deep engagement requires a balance.

A Place to Start: Strategic Geographic Areas

Due to the considerations listed above and existing relationships between Impact Circle members and eager community partners, three geographic areas have organically emerged as strategic places to begin focused partnership efforts around the Master Plan:

- **Building Neighborhood Capacity Program (BNCP) Areas**: In 2011, the City of Flint was one of four distressed U.S. cities chosen by the White House Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative for funding from five federal agencies, to launch Building Neighborhood Capacity Programs. Organized by Metro Community Development (MCD), Flint’s BNCP focus is to empower “neighborhoods [to] develop the knowledge, skills, relationships, interactions, and organizational resources that enable residents, civic leaders, the public and the private sectors and local organizations to...transform neighborhoods into places of opportunity” (http://metro-community.org/community-building/building-neighborhood-capacity-program/). Through a research-based process, MCD selected two focus neighborhoods that were the most disinvested in the city. The areas being served are in the Flint’s first and third wards where there are two anchor organizations working in each; respectively, they are WOW Outreach/Our Savior Lutheran Church and Foss Avenue Baptist Church/Habitat for Humanity. An advisory council of residents and organization representatives guides BNCP initiatives, which are already aligned with the Master Plan. In October, BNCP, University Outreach, MSU and WOW Outreach co-organized an effort to bring neighborhood stakeholders together with local higher education institutions to begin strategizing how to partner in the BNCP area with the Master Plan as a framework.

- **Civic Park Neighborhood**: Civic Park is one of Flint’s oldest neighborhoods, a historic district and apparently the first fully planned subdivision in the U.S. Many long-time residents still live there amongst growing numbers of abandoned homes. Joy Tabernacle is the leading anchor institution, and works alongside Habitat for Humanity, the Genesee County Land Bank and faith-based organizations like Forge Flint to address blight in the neighborhood as well as other community needs such as opportunities for local youth. The recent blight project involved boarding up houses in ways that made it difficult to discern vacant from occupied buildings, causing positive ripple effects of quickly decreasing crime rates and an improved sense of community safety. Civic Park has been long overlooked for investment due to redlining and its designation as a historic district, which previously made it ineligible to receive demolition funds. This contributed to the neighborhood’s uphill struggle to stop blight in its tracks. In September 2014, through negotiations with the City, Land Bank and community advocates, the Michigan State Housing Development Authority (MSHDA) made the landmark decision to fund $2.6 million for demolition of 225 unsalvageable houses in Civic Park. Now help is needed to create new uses for green space, as well as continuing efforts to stabilize and draw economic development into the area. A strong neighborhood association also offers opportunities for
collaborative projects. A relationship with Civic Park beginning with Joy Tabernacle, Forge Flint and Habitat was sparked through a faculty member from the Social Work Department. Joy Tabernacle has hosted multiple City of Flint community input sessions related to the Master Plan and serves as a hub for community-building activity within Civic Park.

- **Half-mile Radius around Campus:** The Master Plan calls on all anchor institutions in Flint to invest in their surrounding ½ mile radius. U3 Ventures from Philadelphia is currently working in Flint to develop an “Eds and Meds” anchor strategy, engaging top leadership at UM-Flint, Hurley, McLaren, Genesys, MSU and other higher education institutions. The three key objectives for the anchor strategy are on living local, buying local and maximizing other opportunities, such as making the University Avenue corridor a corridor of public safety. Continuing to invest in the area immediately surrounding campus and branching into nearby neighborhoods where UM-Flint is well connected will continue to uplift areas where many of our students, faculty, and staff live and spend time in Flint.

While not discussed in detail here, each of these three areas offers other strategic advantages, including:

- numerous opportunities for community engagement across academic disciplines;

- having already has received attention from federal and/or state funders which is a good indication of future funding prospects; and,

- faith-based organizations are long-standing neighborhood anchors. This aligns well with University Outreach’s desire to position UM-Flint for the possibility of competing nationally in the area of interfaith partnerships, a new focus area that President Obama recently established within the President’s Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll for interfaith partnerships. While awards do not and should not drive UM-Flint’s engagement with faith-based organizations, it is a type of partnership we are challenging ourselves to foster more intentionally.

Members of the Impact Circle wish to impress upon campus the importance of coordinating community engagement efforts more intentionally, not only in the campus’ immediate neighborhoods, but at least equally important in areas of Flint where the campus’ presence is relatively thin. While there will continue to be some room for one-time projects and the continuation of long-term engagement in other areas of the community, it is imperative that that UM-Flint harnesses the opportunity of the Master Plan to foster deep, action-oriented relationships.