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FINAL

FORGOTTEN IN 7

PG INVESTIGATION: Census data shows Pittsburgh housing stock is nation's third oldest; communities like Larimer pay the price

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

With two luxury apartment complexes, fast-casual eateries and an LA Fitness, Bakery Square has emerged as a flashpoint of private development in Pittsburgh's East End.

The projects have been touted online and on social media, from the neon bakery sign that adorns the Google office building to the slogan of the shopping district's developer, Walnut Capital: "The best in city

But just blocks away are the signs of a neighborhood that has been in distress for decades; empty, boardedup buildings, shuttered brick churches, fire-ravaged homes and weedy, barren lots on street after street.

"Look around here. Do you see any businesses?" said Demond Braddy, 49, who has spent nearly all of his life in that neighborhood: Larimer. "The neighborhood ate itself."

Houses with crumbling roofs, collapsed porches and peeling exteriors line many of the streets, where the vast majority of housing was built decades ago. These decrepit, blighted properties - many devoid of residents — are relics of another time and, some say, another place.

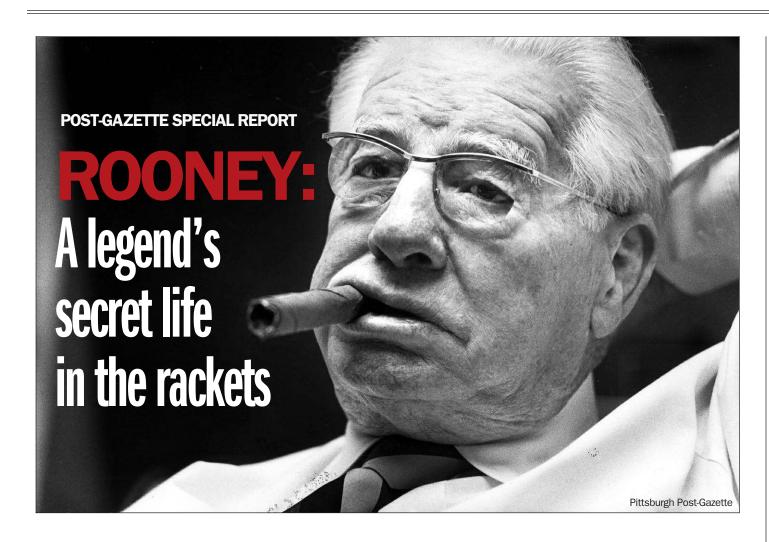
The homes in Larimer are emblematic of an aging housing stock that dominates the entire city, according

SEE HOUSING, PAGE A-9



Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Demond Braddy, 49, who has lived in Larimer nearly all of his life, says flight and crime have left his neighborhood filled with empty fields and vacant and aging homes.



FBI reports, interviews shed new light on Art Rooney Sr.'s early days before building Steelers into a powerhouse

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

or nearly a century, the story that Art Rooney and the Steelers have told about how he built his fortune before the football team became profitable has been a rags-to-riches tale about the son of a hardscrabble immigrant Irish family who made it big through pluck and hard work. He was a professional athlete, played the horses,

For generations, his enduring legacy, the six-time Super Bowl-winning Steel-

promoted major boxing bouts.

invested wisely in the stock market and

More inside

Rooney's career in the rackets started on the North Side with a numbers operation, Page A-7

ers, have served as a worldwide, cultural touchstone for the city.

But a closer look at his life, bolstered by recently released FBI documents, archival records from the University of Pittsburgh, and a trove of federal and state court files, reveals that much of the money that built his early wealth came

from his role as a major player in the city's rackets — numbers, slot machines, horse betting, card gambling rooms and

illegal alcohol during Prohibition. The documents show he was involved in illegal operations from the mid-1920s through at least the late 1940s, although he was only publicly named in connection with any of them twice.

During those years, due to a loyal-tothe-bone cadre of powerful political friends, and smart, well-placed alliances with law enforcement, Rooney managed

SEE ROONEY, PAGE A-6



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ELECTION 2222

Hundreds of county election workers have left since 2020

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The first resignations came in early 2020. It began as a trickle: Several elections directors decided to leave or retire due to foreseeable challenges of implementing no-excuse mail-in voting and new voting machines using paper ballots. Then came what was much harder to predict: the COVID-19 pan-

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ing access while

Biden swings

through Western

demic during what would be the highest turnout for an election in Pennsylvania

Since then, public servants with more than 1,000 years of cumulative experience are gone from county elections offices due to burnout, retirements, stress and even threats in this new, hyper-partisan world that puts them under the critical eye of election deniers and skeptics.

More than half of Pennsylvania's counties have lost one of their top elections officials since 2020. Sev-

drives could get boost from Biden's pot pardons, A-10

eral counties have gone through multiple elections directors in that time, including Westmoreland and Butler counties, both of which have ongoing lawsuits with their former directors.

The upheaval of county elections offices is worse down the chain of command: There are at least eight counties whose entire staffs have fewer than three years of experience administering elections, according to a Post-Gazette analysis.

"It should be a source of alarm for everyone when you see 600 accumulated years of [top] election administration experience evaporate in the state in the span of just two

SEE **ELECTION**, PAGE A-4



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Forgotten in Time

Larimer bearing brunt of city's aging housing

HOUSING, FROM A-1

to the latest data from the U.S. Census Bureau. Half of all housing units in the city were built before 1940 — the third-oldest stock among major cities in the nation, a Post-Gazette analysis found.

As a percentage of its total housing, only Buffalo, N.Y., and St. Louis are older.

While the numbers point to a rich history and a host of architectural styles that have been preserved in all their splendor, they also highlight the critical urban problems that continue to plague Pittsburgh's oldest neighborhoods: abandoned homes and communities in dire need of revitalization.

Aged housing stock isn't inherently problematic, showcasing a city's historic character while sheltering its residents. For instance, in Manchester-Chateau, the median age of homes is nearly a century, according to the city, and the neighborhood, which encompasses Pittsburgh's largest historic district, is touted by the city as a prime example of urban preservation.

But in many of the neighborhoods beyond, preservation and age don't go hand in hand. The numbers are striking: Residential properties built before 1940 garnered over eight times more housing code violations than homes that went up in later years, according to a Post-Gazette analysis of city

In addition, these properties were nine times more likely to be deemed "unsound for human habitation" by the county Office of Property Assessments, records show. In all, 948 homes built before 1940 were found to be unsuitable for living, compared to just 104 that went up after that vear.

On a one-mile thoroughfare in Larimer, Meadow Street, the Post-Gazette found at least four houses deemed unfit for human habitation and a dozen others slapped with code violations, including those with unsafe structures and electrical hazards.

"What you got left is a lot of fields," said Mr. Braddy, pointing to a vast open area where homes once stood.

Dozens of census tracts amid the entire scope of the city, from Crafton Heights to Point Brooze remain in sim ilar condition. In Homewood North, which has more housing code violations than any other neighborhood in Pittsburgh, more than 60% of the housing was constructed before 1940. And in some areas, like Perry North, that figure reaches nearly 90%.

Beyond the problem of deteriorating properties, a trove of research dating back decades shows ties between health issues and poor housing conditions. In a 2002 study from the National Institutes of Health, for example, researchers found higher incidence of respiratory infections, asthma and lead poisoning.

Meredith Hughes, a senior policy director at the University of Pittsburgh's Health Policy Institute, said that compared to the country at large, Pittsburgh's housing faces disproportionate rates of reported water leakage, mold, structural issues, inadequate warmth, and rodent sight-

ings.
"There are a lot of structural problems in older homes in Pittsburgh that can contribute to health issues. You always hear a lot about houses in Pittsburgh having wet basements. But looking at the data, as we've done, you actually see some of that is confirmed," Ms. Hughes said.

Since 2015, housing in Larimer has been hit with about 3,500 Allegheny County Health Department code violations, including dozens of ceiling leaks, inoperable toilets, and missing or incomplete duct work. In one duplex on Ladson Street built in 1920, inspectors imposed hundreds of health violations — 659 in all - including broken toilets, evidence of a rodent in-



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Demond Braddy, 49, who lives on Joseph Street in Larimer, says the most devastating impact on the neighborhood was the crack cocaine epidemic that swept the city in the late 1980s and early part of the next decade.

festation and sewer odor. As in so many of the city's

neighborhoods, the toll on housing took place from many of the same trends: flight to the suburbs, crime, poverty, and a lack of reinvestment in areas that were once thriving residential strongholds.

At 177 Mayflower St., shards of broken glass are scattered on the front porch of one of Larimer's countless abandoned residences. Across the boards that cover the windows, a simple plea is inscribed twice in graffiti: "We need more Black love."

A majority-Black neighborhood, Larimer is a rarity within predominantly white Allegheny County. Today, more than three quarters of Larimer's 1,700 residents are Black, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Mr. Braddy said his grandmother, Mamie Godbold, moved to Pittsburgh in the 1920s to escape discrimination in South Carolina. Once a burgeoning community with a largely Italian population, the neighborhood saw significant population declines and flight during the latter half of the 20th century.

In his time, Mr. Braddy watched people move away and in many cases, family businesses shut their doors. But he said the most devastating impact on Larimer was the crack cocaine epidemic that swept the city in the late 1980s and early part of the next decade: The year "1992 was the end of everything.'

The shootouts and corner street dealers drove many of the families to move, he said. "They just left their homes. They were scared and got out. We always had drugs, but not like that. A whole generation got caught in that," Mr. Braddy said. He points to the corner of Joseph Street and Larimer Avenue, where he watched childhood friends get caught up in crack sales and gang violence.

"A lot of the guys I went to grade school with, they're dead now," he said.

Police crackdowns in Larimer and other areas eventually helped residents take back their streets and homes, but what's left behind, the empty houses abandoned years ago present a different kind of problem, say housing advo-

The two-story brick house where Mr. Braddy lives is surrounded on both sides by open fields, which are mowed by a neighbor, he said. As crime has greatly lessened, "things have become quieter," he said.

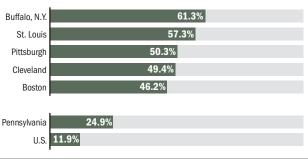
In Larimer, where more than two-thirds of the housing was erected more than 80 years ago, the Larimer Consensus Group has led the fight to help the neighborhood and create more affordable housing.

"When I look at the stability of other neighborhoods Squirrel Hill, Shadyside I wonder: What's the difference?" said K. Chase Patterson, chairman of the group.

In the past decade, some of that help has arrived in

Percent of housing units built 1939 or earlier

Pittsburgh has the third-highest percentage of houses built before 1940 among the 100 most populous cities in the U.S.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau



At 177 Mayflower St., shards of broken glass are scattered on the front porch of one of Larimer's countless abandoned residences. Across the boards that cover the windows, a simple plea is inscribed twice in graffiti: "We need more Black love."

the form of public dollars. In 2014, Larimer received a \$30 million grant from the Department of ing and Urban Development through the federal Choice Neighborhoods initiative, which brings in both public and private dol-

New affordable housing units have cropped up, including the Cornerstone and Larimer Pointe apartment complexes. The former Larimer School building is under construction to become a mixed-income housing and commercial space.

City Councilman Ricky Burgess, whose district includes Larimer and nearby neighborhoods, said development has been guided by a strategy of intentionally targeting areas that are already close to those of interest to the private market, such as Larimer's streets near East Liberty and Bakery Square. "Development moves like

fire, and you have to feed it; you have to coax it. So if you want to bring development into these communities, you have to start on the strongest edge, and then bring it inward." he said

But that strategy also leaves vast sections of the city with abandoned and decrepit homes. Larimer's interior along with neighborhoods that don't align with the city's market demand — continue to languish. Areas like Lawrenceville, with some of the highest concentrations of aged housing stock, have seen jump-starts of development, but the new properties that dot the neighborhood have priced out many residents, leading to gentrifica-

For most older urban centers, like Pittsburgh, revitalizing neighborhoods and replacing old housing is difficult and costly, say housing experts, and ultimately takes time and requires private investment.

"It's a big issue and it's as any would hope or assume, but it's frustrating," said Mr. In Upper Lawrenceville,

for example, it took close to \$675,000 in public dollars and millions in private funds to develop seven low-income homes through the Lawrenceville Community Land Trust.

While such projects require extensive time and money, recent efforts by the city have failed, records show.

Despite launching a land bank in 2015 to help turn around and sell vacant properties, a Post-Gazette investigation last year found that the new entity, led by Mr. Burgess as chairman, had acquired only a single empty lot in Larimer after spending hundreds of thousands on studies and consultants.

Mr. Burgess said the land bank's problems were due to two causes: a failure to pass legislation that would expedite the land bank's ability to acquire property through sheriff's sales, and a lack of money to actually buy the properties.

However, a second land bank in the region running since 2017, the Tri-COG named for its three councils of government — had not only raised more money than Pittsburgh, but took ownership of 39 houses, one building and seven vacant lots in its first five years.

After years of failure. oversight of the Pittsburgh Land Bank was transferred to the Urban Redevelopment Authority, the city's economic development agency, but the land bank's website continues to feature only a single property for sale in its "featured inventory."

The URA did not respond to repeated questions about



The two-story brick house where Mr. Braddy lives is surrounded on both sides by open fields, which are mowed by a

Pittsburgh's aging housing stock

According to the latest release by the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey, half of Pittsburgh's housing stock was built before 1940. Older homes promote a city's history and preservation, but Pittsburgh's aging housing creates problems for public health and safety - including decrepit and unsafe homes. The city has struggled to revitalize many of the neighborhoods with the highest concentration of older homes, especially those areas hit the hardest by blight and crime.

% OF HOUSING BUILT PRE-1940 HIGHEST % *Map shows 2020 census tracts

PITTSBURGH CENSUS TRACTS WITH THE HIGHEST RATES % housing built pre-1940 89.7 1 Perry North 2 Bloomfield 77.7 3 Regent Square, Squirrel Hill South 4 Central North Side 75.7 5 Highland Park 74.7 6 Elliott, West End 74.4 7 Upper Lawrenceville 73.2 8 Morningside 9 Perry North 72.6 10 Central Lawrenceville 71.4 11 Lower Lawrenceville 71.1 12 Point Breeze 70.9 13 Marshall-Shadeland 14 Greenfield 69.6 15 Polish Hill 68.5 16 Larimer 66.9 17 Squirrel Hill North 66.9 18 Hazelwood, Glen Hazel 65.7 19 Bloomfield 65.5 20 Homewood West, Homewood North 65.3

Note: Some neighborhoods contain multiple census tracts

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Post-Gazette

the status of the land bank or the number of homes and lots it has acquired so far.

Years after creating the land bank, Pittsburgh City Council tried to tackle some of the problems of poor housing by creating a rental registry program with hopes of holding property owners accountable for shoddy hous-

ing conditions. But the program faced a legal challenge from the Apartment Association of Metropolitan Pittsburgh, and a judge placed a hold on the registry in May.

The city itself has become a landlord with thousands of aging properties, including dangerous structures that continually get slapped with code violations by the city's own inspectors.

The Post-Gazette found that the city owns an estimated 11,583 parcels of land, 853 of which have buildings. Nearly half of those properties incurred code and health violations, with the city owning the properties for a median time period of nine vears.

For Larimer, Mr. Patterson said the community needs a program in which residents can present their own vision for the neighborhood and invite investors to bring those ideas to fruition. He and many of the area's residents fear prospectors and gentrification will trump the needs of the community, leading to displacement.

At a Larimer Consensus Group meeting Tuesday to update residents on the community's development plans, group members expressed their concerns about the city's efforts to help their neighborhood, private developers and the URA.

"A lot of it has to do with the fact that historically, poor and disenfranchised folks are taken advantage of by those with means. There's a lot of mistrust and frustration, all reasonable and fair," Mr. Patterson said.

Mayor Ed Gainey, who lives in Larimer and ran on a campaign in 2021 of tackling the city's housing crisis with "aggressive action." did not respond to interview requests.

The city's subsidies to the URA are down almost 30% from two years prior, according to the city's 2021 financial report. And as municipal funding stalls, experts and city officials agree it's no match for the influx of private investment that supports development projects in Pittsburgh's more affluent areas.

"We in the city have been fighting, but we're fighting a battle against Goliath. It's the city using a few resources to build these new units in these places where the Goliath, the market, has five million times more money than me, and resources. And those forces are driven by the politics of race, status and class," said Mr. Burgess.

Even with the neighborhood's new mixed-income developments, Mr. Braddy said that he, like most of his fellow residents, will "never be able to afford" the emerging apartments in Larimer. To him, by the time government dollars have reached the neighborhood, there isn't much left to save.

Ultimately, he said, all that's left for him are the memories.

"Every field had a house, and every house had a story," Mr. Braddy said.

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