**Executive Summary**

**Windy Ridge Subdivision: Charlotte, North Carolina**

This report details the findings and outcomes of a year-long initiative in the suburban neighborhood of Windy Ridge in Charlotte, North Carolina. The project was funded by the Raleigh-based Z. Smith Reynolds (ZSR) Foundation and, as such, a version of this report was also submitted to ZSR after the year of funding had elapsed. The report’s authors are all based at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte in either the Department of Geography and Earth Sciences or in the Architecture Department.

The report is structured so that it is both accessible to a general audience but also interesting and relevant to the academic or practitioner. It begins with a brief overview of the dramatic growth in Charlotte which, compounded by the recent economic crisis, has resulted in the proliferation of starter home subdivisions throughout the suburban periphery of the city. Many such subdivisions have fallen victim to intense foreclosure activity over the past several years—Windy Ridge is one such community. The take-home lesson of the report is that a “complex set of contributing factors” has contributed to the current quality of life issues present in the neighborhood. These include low levels of organizational capacity at the neighborhood level as well as serious deficiencies in the built environment, many of which are concerned with both infrastructure and access. Broadly, the report’s findings highlight the challenges that come along with allowing for the development of a community such as Windy Ridge—geographically peripheral; demographically deprived; and developed without adequate attention to established principles of urban design or planning.

The authors have utilized a robust variety of data sources and methods to answer their core research questions, which include: What is the extent of the problem in Windy Ridge? How was the neighborhood developed in the first place? What lessons can we learn from this case study? Data sources include archived news articles and planning documents, windshield surveys, formal and informal interviews, door-to-door surveys and a focus group. Major findings are categorized into three broad thematic strands: community organizing, public space, and safety. These themes also serve as the three major outcome-goals for the ZSR funding. Outcomes at the writing of this report were as follows:

* From an organizing standpoint, the research group faced challenges due to high levels of turnover and low levels of homeownership. Nonetheless, regular monthly meetings were conducted in conjunction with the established Homeowner’s Association and have served as an outlet for resident concerns and, consequently, catalyzers for action-based research projects.
* The need for a public space was established early on and was corroborated by the research team’s findings that original plans for the community included such a space. However, the team encountered unprecedented challenges in attempting to identify a geographic location for such a spot due to a variety of existing conditions related to zoning and other phenomena in the built environment (e.g. power lines, property ownership patterns). The challenges that came along with attempting to meet this goal demonstrate the deep and systemic flaws inherent in the planning process that informed the development of Windy Ridge and in building our cities from a purely market-based set of interests.
* Finally, safety concerns including the need for reliable street lighting and speed bumps have been sufficiently addressed by the team in partnership with community residents.

The report concludes with a set of prescribed “next steps” for work in Windy Ridge as well as a series of “lessons learned.” The biggest lesson is, clearly, that neighborhoods such as Windy Ridge were “built to fail” due to a lethal combination of oversights at the local government level, and challenges related to the larger market-based economic system, particularly in Charlotte, an aggressively growth-driven city. Despite such challenges, the research team was successful in identifying several realistic goals for improving quality of life in the community. These include working towards the purchase of a foreclosed home to be retrofitted as a community resource center and to install a fence on the neighborhood’s perimeter in order to deter criminals and increase local perceptions of safety.

**Postscript: Windy Ridge in 2013**

Since the submission of this report to the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, we have continued our work in Windy Ridge despite the extensive challenges to community organizing, action research, and even to small-scale improvements to the built environment. During the academic years 2011-2012 and 2012-2013, an Americorps VISTA volunteer worked with residents on issues including updating and improving the street lighting infrastructure, reforming the ineffective HOA, and continuing to increase social capital among community members. Successes and challenges with regard to each of the three major goals for the project were:

* ***Organizational capacity building***: The VISTA has worked with other graduate students from the Community Planning Workshop and the Geography and Earth Sciences Department at UNC Charlotte to continue to make connections and research-based partnerships in the neighborhood. Several new key stakeholders have been identified in addition to the original core of resident partners, and we have worked with these individuals to continue to improve quality of life. Particularly of note is our work with the Charlotte School of Law to try to identify ways in which to improve the Homeowner’s Association which, with its legal and financial challenges, has been a source of stress for residents.
* ***Public Space***: Establishing a public space for the community continues to prove challenging due to the barriers outlined above and in the report. Additional funding is needed to fully remedy this situation.
* ***Safety***: We have been quite effective in remedying some of the safety issues most concerning to residents. One major victory since the submission of this report was our work with Duke Power to establish reliable street lighting for residents. Furthermore, with the successful installation of the fence and holly bushes referenced in the report, residents have reported a greater feeling of safety within the community.

We do intend to continue our work in Windy Ridge. Currently, a graduate student working with Dr. Sorensen is conducting a series of quantitative analyses regarding the characteristics of starter home subdivisions in Charlotte to better understand why communities like Windy Ridge have proven so problematic. We continue our partnership with the neighborhood’s long term residents and will continue to seek funding and other forms of support to improve life for residents there as well as to raise awareness about the public policy implications of such a landscape.