

Transcript

The Power of Consensus: A Conversation with Diane Daniels

Neighbor to Neighbor Podcast

Season 1, Episode 2

Laura Peckyno: Hello, this is Laura Peckyno with Rebuilding Together Pittsburgh, and this is our second Neighbor to Neighbor podcast. I have the pleasure of introducing Diane Daniels with the East Hills Community Consensus Group today, and we're so excited to have Diane here today to talk a little bit about her work. Diane, welcome to the podcast.

You are such a force in East Hills and a well-respected leader in Pittsburgh. Can you start by telling us a little bit about yourself and what connects you so deeply to this community and its residents?

Diane Daniels: Well, first of all, thank you very much for having me. I really appreciate it.

I'm happy that we can be your second podcast. When I look at East Hills or we look at East Hills, we are a forgotten neighborhood.

So, thank you so much for that. I'm originally from McKeesport, so when I looked from the Mon Valley and just went to the city of Pittsburgh after doing many other things, in my life, East Hills was just a great place.

Where I live, it's really nice. I love the deer, the turkey. I love the wildlife running around. We're in the city, but we have a rural feel.

And when you think about that, we are rural. But we are also an urban community with a rural feel. So, I really like that. I'm originally from McKeesport. I'm a journalist by trade. I've owned a PR firm, DID and Associates since 1983. I'm a writer and a storyteller by trade. But, when I came to East Hills, because I am who I am, I always was into everything because being a reporter, I always had new resources.

We have two housing developments in our community and (being the type of person I am) I would always participate in activities and events that they had. I always wondered why my part of the community, which is more residential, why the residents didn't participate in the activities that were happening in the housing development. Because they always said, "we're open to everybody". But the residents where I lived were workers, they were firemen, policemen, they were all the teachers. They were working. Back then, East Hills school was there. It was a well-known school. So, I guess people just didn't

need the resources. I didn't need them either, but I still went up there because I'm a people person.

So, I started bringing that together. And then when there were issues happening in the more residential area, I found that when people would tell me things, well, I knew where the resources were in the community and even outside the community, because I know the mayors. I know all the people. So, when we had a problem on our street, I pulled together a meeting, had it at one of the smaller churches.

As I would go through the community and I would talk to the people, I would find that different things were happening. And it was like, wow, well we need to start having meetings with this. So, I started having meetings once a month and people would share, and I would just start bringing resources.

And then a gentleman, Carl Redwood in the Hill District, said he had a group, a consensus group, that he was starting. So, we sat down and talked and that's how we became the East Hills Consensus Group about 15 to 20 years ago.

Laura Peckyno: So you've been leading the group since then?

Diane Daniels: I founded the group myself with a couple other people. We're a consensus group. I like to call it that because we're a group of many other groups. There was another group, EB and A, it was the Eastern area. They tried to have meetings, and they were older ladies and they were doing things, so we kind of banded together because they were working in Penn Hills. Those ladies still work with us.

We're all members. They're like the board and the secretary. We all work together. And then, as I noticed other groups that were in the community, it's just like, well, you have to be a member. So, we are really a group of different organizations, and that's why we are a consensus group. If you come to me and say, oh, well I have a group in East Hills, it's like, well, you should be a part of the consensus group because we all have to work together. We are a conglomeration of different groups in the East Hills community. So, between EB and A and me, we're the founders. I'm the executive director.

Now we work under PCRG, the Pittsburgh Community Reinvestment Group. We didn't always work with them. I was always running around doing things, bringing resources, having meetings, pulling everything together just on my own.

But I always knew Ernie. Who was with PCRG. And I remember the founding members of PCRG because I was a part of the Manchester Citizens Corporation in the, in the height. So, I knew what went on and I knew the purpose of PCRG, and I kept on saying, "Ernie, Ernie, Ernie, we need this. I need help with this. I need help with that." And within the last four years, I've kind of been working with PCRG. Now we're one of their imagining communities.

Laura Peckyno: What would you say is the core mission of the East Hills Community Consensus Group?

Diane Daniels: Well, the core mission is to keep the community together.

When people think of East Hills, they forget that one third of the community is seniors. Now they consider seniors 55 and older, but a lot of the seniors are in their seventies, eighties+. When I look at the Park Hill area (that area was first started in the late seventies) some of those residents are original residents from there. So those ladies are a little older. I'm older, so [the mission] is to preserve those houses and to help those residents. It's what Rebuilding Together is doing, helping people preserve and maintain their houses. It's the main purpose of East Hills Consensus Group, to preserve our neighborhood. To keep our neighborhood thriving, but also to preserve it and make sure that our houses are stabilized.

We want growth. When I look at the housing developments, those are younger people. And when I look at some of the things that we're doing in parts of the community, where we're rehabbing homes, purchasing homes, rehabbing homes where it will connect, where we could get new homeowners.

Laura Peckyno: And affordable homes too.

Diane Daniels: Absolutely.

Laura Peckyno: That's such an important part of the housing crisis right now is that there just are not affordable homes available to young families. If we can rehab what's there and bring people in at a level that is reasonable, affordable, and not out of reach for so many families.

Diane Daniels: Right,

Laura Peckyno: So, you talk a little bit about growth, but also people. People need to stay in their communities too. And affordability also applies to older folks who are having to make decisions about, do I stay in my home, or do I go into a community home, an aging facility and give up my home because I can't afford to make the repairs on that home.

Diane Daniels: Right?

Laura Peckyno: We don't want to force people into a situation where they're having to make that choice of giving up their home just so that they can live comfortably or safely. If they can have repairs done for free from Rebuilding Together Pittsburgh or another organization, it will keep them in their home. That is more affordable than going into some sort of care situation. And it allows them to maintain their freedom. It allows them to maintain their house so that they can pass that on to their relatives when they do pass. It gives them some dignity. They can stay in their home, and they can remain part of the community too.

Diane Daniels: Right. You say affordable. We say quality. It's really the quality of their houses, the quality of new houses. It's their quality of life. So, it all goes hand in hand.

And that's another thing. We look at bringing in resources like Rebuilding Together. When I bring in other resources to work with them, I ask, "Do you have a will? What's going to happen if you pass away? Who's going to take over that house?" So, we work with other organizations. I just try to bring in those resources so that they'll be helpful.

But I also have to look at the stability of the neighborhood, because we have a lot of lots. One of my missions for 2026 is to get those lots cleaned up so we can figure out what's the next step. Should it be building housing? Should we just be cleaning it for gardens? Should we have parklets? So those are some of the things.

So, housing and quality of living is important, but also maintaining what we have. Because we'll never get more land, and we have probably 500 lots in our community. So, it's important to see what are we going to do with those lots. It's almost like a full circle.

Laura Peckyno: So, you are called the East Hills Consensus Group. That word, consensus is very important in my mind, and I'm sure in yours too. You're not the East Hills Action Group. You're not the development group. It's the consensus group. What does that mean in your day-to-day work? How do you build consensus among all of these different voices who are involved in making these plans and decisions? Because it's important for everybody.

Diane Daniels: Well, we have a vision study. That was put together during COVID. That was interesting because we have a lot of seniors, so getting those voices was hard. It was a challenge. But, basically the consensus is just listening. We have monthly meetings. I float around. I'm very open for people to communicate so we know what the residents' needs are. And in some situations, my needs are their needs. We need our streets cleaned. We need our streets repaired. We need our homes repaired. We need the lots taken care of.

We fought for almost 25 years to get East Hills Drive repaired. That was a hard-fought job. Finally, two weeks ago, that street was repaired.

Laura Peckyno: Wow.

Diane Daniels: That street was divided. It's partly owned by Penn Hills, Petra Ministries, and the city. So, pulling all those entities together, working with our state legislator, the Penn Hills State legislator, three mayoral candidates, or our mayors, it was a hard-fought road.

When I look at the consensus of what the community needs, we all need everything. We're working with one organization called the Energy Efficiency Empowerment Group. [The organization installs] electric water heaters if your water heater is eight years old or older. Well, our homes are old, so there's a lot of residents who need water heaters. And they

have a weatherization program and an audit program. That's consensus. We all need the same thing.

Laura Peckyno: East Hills, it is one of the older communities in the area. And it's a very rich community with a rich history. What do you see as the greatest strength there? And what are some of the biggest challenges that the residents are facing right now?

Diane Daniels: Well, our strength is the consensus group. Because the consensus group is our voice. You ask, "what's our needs?" Our needs are to get those lots cleaned up. And to make sure that the seniors that need help get help. And that I'm making sure who they are.

We can't help everybody, but we're at least putting people in touch with the resources that they need. And because we have two housing developments, that makes it a little bit interesting as well because they're owned by different organizations. So, we're making sure that we are working together with them to ensure their needs are taken care of.

But our needs are the same needs of every resident in the city of Pittsburgh— Jobs for the young people, activities for the young people. We have over 700 young people between infancy and 21 in the community, but we don't have a community center. So, what do they do? Where do they go? Also bus transportation, making sure that we have adequate transportation.

So, we have a lot of needs. Now. Can we handle and deal with all those needs? No. And now we have a new administration coming in. Which is both a good thing and a bad thing because every time you build relationships, now we have to build relationships with another organization.

But we work with our politicians. Our city council person is really good. But we are maintaining the relationships and making sure that we're getting the attention, because the consensus group is the voice.

Laura Peckyno: Well, talking about being a consensus group, you can speak louder when you speak as group.

Diane Daniels: Mm-hmm.

Laura Peckyno: And so, I think in my mind, knowing that you're a consensus group made up of lots of smaller groups means that all of those smaller groups can have a bigger voice.

Diane Daniels: Exactly. Yeah. Exactly.

Laura Peckyno: You can't just overlook a community because it's a smaller community or an overlooked community or a community that's tucked away someplace. You are talking as a group. So you can finally be heard.

Diane Daniels: Or hope to be heard.

Laura Peckyno: It sounds like you're so busy on a daily basis just trying to be heard and working with these different groups to build relationships. Would you say that building relationships is a large part of what you do as the director of the consensus group?

Diane Daniels: Yes and no. Because I am who I am, I know so many people, so many groups, so that's a good thing. I know where to go. I'm a former journalist, so research is a great part [of the work]. And then sometimes other people will say, "think of Diane" or "did you ever think of looking at East Hills?" And the president of our board is the magistrate, so we have key people in key positions. We have people that work for the city council. We have people in East Hills that work for the city. We have a person that works for Senator Costa. So, we have key people in our community. That really makes it great.

Laura Peckyno: And you're bridging that gap between the individual residents and those people who are actually making the decisions or are pushing an agenda with the government, the people who have the money.

Diane Daniels: So, it makes it easier. If, when I need certain things, it's just like, oh, well let me go to this person. So, our councilman works really well with us. A person that works for the councilman is our vice president. Those are key things. We just have some really good people in our community.

Laura Peckyno: East Hills is a great community.

Diane Daniels: Oh, it's an excellent community.

Laura Peckyno: There are lots of people who live there and it's great that you have all of these people who are dedicated enough and interested enough in keeping that community alive, safe.

Diane Daniels: Stable.

Laura Peckyno: We want the community to be stable. Rebuilding Together Pittsburgh does too. I want people to be safe in their homes. I want people to have a home where they can live their lives and be happy. And I want them to have that home to pass on to their kids or their families when they are ready to do that. I want the community itself to be thriving.

Diane Daniels: And in order to do that, it has to be a combination of things. We own 80 some properties on Park Hill Drive. We're looking at rehabbing those homes to bring in new residents because you have older residents, but you also have to have new residents. So, when you say home ownership—that quality of life and everything—you have to do that as well. Those things are important.

And then you have to maintain what you have. We have a strong relationship with Upstream as well. Dornbush is one of the steepest streets in the area (well they say in the

country). And we have all these hills, including Tokay and Wilkinsburg Avenue. So, all this water is flows down the streets.

Upstream worked really closely with us, got the money and everything, and I have put a garden there. And we just put a beautiful art installation there. So, we're saving lives as well, because when that water comes down, millions of gallons of water go into the well that they put there. I don't know if most people would remember, but when that situation happened on Washington Boulevard several years ago, that's where the water was coming from. Yeah. Down our hills, flowing all through.

Upstream plays a really critical part. Our partners play such a critical role in some of the things that we're doing. So, when you talk about going out and finding those resources and maintaining things, sometimes they come to us [with ideas and solutions]—because I would've never thought of anything like water management.

When I look at the rain garden that they put there, that's beautification. The artwork, the installation that we did, is a Sankofa Bird, and it's talking about Sankofa is an African phrase where Sankofa means you are remembering your past, bringing in your future. The installation also features flowers and butterflies.

That's the future, because the residents that live on that street have lived there for a very, very long time. We are once again bringing our history together with the future. And we had that beautiful installation right on the corner of Dornbush and Bricelyn. I invite people to go look at that.

It's gorgeous. It's beautiful, Sankofa. But it's also saving lives. So, when you talk about the resources and just pulling them together, yeah, it is good. But no day is the same for me. I'm here today [for this interview], it's like, oh, this is great. So, no day is the same, you know. But it all works out.

Laura Peckyno: So, I know that Rebuilding Together Pittsburgh has not had a relationship with the East Hills Consensus Group for very long. We've been doing small repairs in that neighborhood for some time because we've been around for 30 years.

But I don't think we encountered the consensus group until about a year and a half ago or so. And after some brief discussions at several summits and neighborhood events, we actually put a lot more of the funding into East Hills because we realized that there was a real need there. You don't know what the need is in a neighborhood until you start talking to people. Relationship building is a part of all of this. It's the starting point for a lot of this work. We are really happy to be working more with you and with the consensus group and with all of the groups in East Hills and Lincoln Lemington, Belmar.

Diane Daniels: When we met Travis [RTP's CEO] through PCRG, we had a meeting. Travis was relatively new at the time. That kind of opened the doors for working together. And when he mentioned what RTP was doing, it was like, well, we're almost neighbors and

doing related work. When you really think about it, the connections are vital. Once it started coming together, it was like, okay, great. Everything takes time. I mean, you can meet somebody today, and it might be two years before a collaboration comes through, but that's just how it works.

Laura Peckyno: Well, I feel like it's really important to talk a little bit about partnerships and how, nonprofits and organizations like RTP can work with consensus groups like East Hills Consensus Group. In your opinion, why is it so important for organizations like RTP—who are bringing funding and volunteers to do this work—why is it so important for us to work in collaboration with the East Hills Consensus Group rather than just bringing our work into the neighborhood and just picking out individual houses and starting to do work?

Diane Daniels: If you [the organizations] didn't have communities to go into, you wouldn't have work, you know? So, partnerships are very important for all the communities that you're working in because when you go to a funder and you talk about your needs, it all has to come together. Needs have to align. You, as the organization, want to bring the resources. That's your need. We have the need for the resources. That's our need. So, we do have to work together.

When I'm out and about and I run into funders, I find out that you are applying for a grant. That's when I pop up and say, "oh, we're working with Rebuilding Together" and then they say, "oh, that's great." They're meeting with me and they're seeing what's really happening. Collaboration is key. And we're in a political climate right now that if we don't collaborate and work together, we're all going to lose.

So we can work together, you know, with each of us going to our political people saying, "are you fighting for us to get these credits back", or "we're working with this group and they're getting ready to lose their funding. What can we do and how can we work together?" So it goes full circle.

Laura Peckyno: Mm-hmm. Again, voices are stronger when they speak together.

Diane Daniels: Together, yes.

Laura Peckyno: If we're all in agreement about what needs to happen and what the vision is, then we can speak loudly and strongly about what needs to happen and really advocate for that for the communities.

Diane Daniels: Right, right. Absolutely.

Laura Peckyno: You've been really essential in making sure that RTP is providing what East Hills needs and what they want, not what we want.

Diane Daniels: Well, I'm an advocate for the community. That's important to me. And that's why we're the Registered Community Organization (RCO). Look at what's going on with

city council right now. They're trying to get rid of some of the RCOs. That's a no-no, because it's our voice. It's the community that knows what they need and what they want. So, we're the RCOs. We're the voices of the community.

Laura Peckyno: When you think about the next five or 10 years, what is your vision for East Hills? What does a healthy, thriving community look like to you?

Diane Daniels: Well, I can't even think about five or 10 years because right now I have to live in the present.

And just know that as long as we are trying to maintain things and we're doing what we're doing, then the future is bright. When I think about our Park Hill area, getting that rehabbed would be a great thing. So, my goal is just to continue to do what we're doing now. To look towards the future.

I can't really say what five or 10 years are going to be like. Because every day is just a challenge. But every day is a grateful day because it's like, okay, Lord, let's go put people in my life that I can help. Put people in my life that could help me. And together those two things make it okay. So, every time I meet somebody, I think about where this person fits. Oh, this person could be the next executive director. This person could be this.

I can't really say what the future is going to be. All I know is the future is going to be bright because every time I ride up Frankstown, when you look up, when you're driving up on those beautiful days and I see that blue sky, I just see hope. I see a great future, and I see God saying just keep leaning on me and this community is going to be a great community. That's kind of how I look at it, and that's kind of how I see the future. As long as we keep working together, we build together and help our seniors. That's a bright future. And, working to get those houses rehabbed, that's a bright future. That's kind of how I look at it.

Our board and I work hard to make sure that the community is having hope.

Laura Peckyno: If someone who is from the East Hills is listening right now and they want to get involved to maybe help with what you're doing or they want to make their voices heard, how can they connect with the East Hills Consensus Group?

Diane Daniels: Well, there are several ways. We normally meet on the third Thursday of the month at Petra at six o'clock. That's one way. You could always email me.

EastHillsConsensusGroup@gmail.com. We also have a Facebook page, East Hills Consensus Group.

I would say look at our Facebook page. I try to really make sure that we're putting information on that. But I really like for people to attend the meetings because each person has a gift and a talent that we could be tapping into once you come to a meeting. And you don't have to come to every meeting. But just help out.

Maybe you could do emails. Maybe you could be working with the social media. We have a beautiful newsletter. I have a worker, Sharnath. He does a great job on that newsletter. I would love to work with a young person, because we have the Amani Christian Academy in our community. I would love to let him work with a young person to do that.

I would love to work with a young person on our social media too. That's not my thing. But it's a young person's thing because they have ideas. So, I'd love for people to get involved. You don't have to keep coming to meetings, but I do want you to come to meetings, because we have so much information that comes through there.

And plus, that is how you know what's going on. We have public safety there every month to tell you what's going on crime-wise or not crime-wise. Our city planner comes every month. The council person has a report every month. The city has a report every month. That's how you know what's going on.

For example, when situations happen, we rally together. Last year we had a big water main break. The residents came together. We went to the water company because they denied responsibility and they weren't doing anything. We had the media there. We had two state reps there, and we had the city council there.

So, we fight. You know, we have to fight. We advocate. That is the only way, if you're having problems (and we all have problems). And we have to solve those problems together. So that's how you get involved. Come to the meetings. Go to the Facebook page and just email EastHillsConsensusGroup@gmail.com. I answer all my emails. Maybe not today, but by tomorrow.

Laura Peckyno: I can attest. You do answer those emails.

Diane Daniels: Because you never know. That could be something important. I ask God for resources every day, so there it is. Opportunities are everything,

Laura Peckyno: And for any listeners across the region who have been inspired by your work and what's happening in the East Hills right now, what's the best way they can support you and the residents of East Hills and the consensus group?

Diane Daniels: Oh, fundraising. We always need money. Everybody knows somebody.

But, right now when I look at 2026, getting those lots cleaned up is important. One thing I would like to do in 2026 is to find a good lawn care business out there that's willing to train and work with some young people through the Learn & Earn Program. The city's Learn and Earn program can work with them in the summer to get the lots cleaned up. You not only will be cleaning up a community, but you could be getting potential future staff. You'll be getting notoriety and you'll be helping people. In 2026 that would be one thing, other than funding, that would be very important.

Laura Peckyno: Fantastic. Diane, thank you so much for speaking with me today and telling me a little bit more about what the Consensus Group is doing and what you're all about. I really appreciate you and I appreciate all the work that you have done to keep the community strong and to give them a voice.

Diane Daniels: Well, I'm just happy that you asked. Rebuilding Together is very important to us. You're a good resource and what you're doing in the community, we would never be able to match it. I'm happy and grateful that you asked me to come today.

Laura Peckyno: Well, thank you for letting us know what the community needs and what they want and where they're looking to for the future.