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Howard Park residents appreciate mixed uses

On the Web

Howard Park Neighborhood Association
www.howardparkneighborhood.org

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An energized Howard Park Neighborhood Association is enjoying the resurgence of urban residential living in the riverside region that was once its own town called Lowell and retains the advantages of nearby shopping and jobs.

Roy Prince, who moved from Chicago when he was in second grade 35 years ago, says some things have changed but much has remained the same. His house, the original on Quimby Street and once a blacksmith's shop, is more than 100 years old.

"It was a quiet neighborhood," recalls Roy, secretary-treasurer of the association that restarted a few years ago after a 1970s group lapsed. "It was close to schools. Housing was affordable, and it was just a great neighborhood type of feeling."

Peter Starkey and Bill Hazel, who moved in seven months ago, have the same experience.

"We were living in a subdivision," Peter says. "We liked the location -- the river, the downtown area. It's a pretty great neighborhood. People look out for each other. Our neighbors are really nice and considerate. It's a nice little community." The residential character survives so close to downtown despite some episodes when businesses tore down old houses to make room for commercial property.

Some 20 years ago, discussions about location for the Karl King Towers were going on, and a speculator bought up about a dozen houses near Howard Park, recalls Ervin Baker, who has lived in the community for 35 years. When the towers were built across the river, the homes, mostly in need of repair, were razed, and the Atrium office building eventually went on the land.

Homeowners hope the development of the land that Transpo will vacate when it moves to the Studebaker Corridor will maintain the urban residential character. Weiss Homes' plan to build six houses on Notre Dame Avenue south of its Jefferson Street headquarters is encouraging.

"We like the diversity of the businesses and the houses," says association president Marti

Lewis, who has maintained the old-fashioned soda fountain in her Howard Park Hardware. "That's why we moved here -- the urbanness, the downtown, the density, all the activity, the traffic, the noise, all the diversity."

Lewis, who started renting in Howard Park in 1988 and bought a house 12 or 13 years ago, wants to see the area grow along those lines. "We need residential," she says. "We need retail. We don't need office buildings. We need families. We need people. We need a range of prices of homes that are affordable. We're putting our money into our neighborhood.

"We're not giving up. We do need help, and we need more voices."

"This is still a very viable, livable community," Roy says, adding that neighbors know each others' phone numbers. "It's not somewhere where you just come and park.

"The housing on this side is still very affordable. It's mostly owner-occupied. There are some rental properties. Renters are allowed to join. It gives people a chance to get involved in the decision-making process. We don't get so intrusive as to tell what they can and cannot put on their property."

Looking out for each other in Howard Park means folks paint a house for an older neighbor, clean up the river and the Transpo lot, hold block parties, and circulate petitions for improvements, from slowing down traffic on Wayne and Eddy streets to reviving the old-style Ethnic Festival. Later this spring, Roy and his neighbors will hold a block party to celebrate the restoration of Quimby Street and its sidewalks in a 60-40 cost share with the city.

"Everyone in the whole block got together with the city," he says. "It had been over 30 years since our street had been paved. The sidewalks were pretty nonexistent."

The historic neighborhood, with Zion United Methodist Church, two houses associated with Frank Lloyd Wright and two associated with the Studebaker family, would like to reconnect with the Sunnymede neighborhood and Jefferson School across Eddy Street.

"The walkability of it has changed," Roy says. "It's hard to cross Eddy Street. I used to go to Jefferson School."

Residents want the city to consider a walkover, a median or other ways of making Eddy Street easier to cross. They also want to slow down traffic on Wayne Street, perhaps by making it a chicane, a serpentine route with attractive landscaping in the curves. "It's the street a lot of people come down with their children," says Marti, explaining that families with strollers often approach Howard Park from Sunnymede on the route.

More younger families are also moving into Howard Park, reviving the energy that old-timers remember from their own youth.

"There's more of an influx of younger people now," and many of them are active in the association, Ervin agrees. "They're energizing the area. Some of the homes have been improved around here.

"People realize this is an ideal spot. It seems like an upswing for the area."

Know of a neighborhood worth writing about? Let Gene Stowe know at stowegene@yahoo.com.
