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IMPROVING HISTORIC NEIGHBORHOODS: NOT JUST FOR RICH PEOPLE

Public housing developments are seldom thought of as historic neighborhoods. However, as Rocky Marcoux of the Milwaukee Housing Authority explained at Historic Milwaukee's annual meeting, public housing in Milwaukee dates to the 1930s. Parklawn, near Sherman Blvd., was built in 1937 to house low-income people including widows, families, and some civil servants. Social Security didn't take effect until 1941, and Parklawn as one of the few alternatives to the poor available then, Mr. Marcoux said. However, public housing was often viewed as second class, and over time, its reputation suffered.

With the belief that "the built environment affects behavior," and the help of four federal HOPE VI (6) grants from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Milwaukee has begun to turn this around. The Housing Authority has been revamping the public housing developments so that they more nearly resemble traditional, city neighborhoods, instead of distressing "warehouses for poor people, as Mr. Marcoux called them.

At Parklawn, the Housing Authority added more streets while saving most of the trees that had been planted by the WPA in the 1930s. Parklawn has a park, Monument Park, with statues and markers commemorating the Public Housing movement and the work of the WPA and the Wisconsin Federal Art Project. Parklawn is also home to a YMCA branch and the Central City Cyberschool, a citywide Charter School. These attractions help integrate Parklawn into the surrounding neighborhoods.

At Hillside, near N. 6th & W. Vliet Streets, improvements included replacing asphalt with grass, and restoring the city grid of through streets. Previously, there were only two ways in or out. At Lapham Park on N. 6th St., most buildings were torn down and replaced with traditional-looking houses in

seven different styles. Most of the units now have doorways wide enough to accommodate wheelchair-bound visitors and/or residents. Some residents may not need that now, but it allows them to stay in their neighborhood if their physical needs change later.

The problems of homelessness and aberrant behavior are vexing, he said. To serve low-income people, yet try to keep the developments viable, the Housing Authority's strategy has been to "raise the bar on behavior" and help residents achieve higher incomes through job coaching.

More changes are coming. The two towers at 17th & Highland will be demolished and replaced with four-story housing. Two streets, N. 18th St. and N. 19th St., will be extended through the development, from Juneau Ave. on the south to McKinley Ave. on the north. The county may remove the berm from Dr. Martin Luther King Park to make it easier to see into the park. By the end of 2004, W. Juneau Ave. will be extended eastward from 18th St. to N. 17th St., and W. McKinley Ave. will also connect to N. 17th Street. Pabst City (the old brewery complex) and the Park East Corridor will be redeveloped, injecting new life into these near, west side neighborhoods.

Mr. Marcoux pointed out the rebirth of Capitol Court, and said, "A transformation is going on. High-density areas of the city have a lot of buying power. Everyone needs groceries, etc. Redeveloping the city costs less than building new suburbs and wider freeways because the infrastructure – sewer, water, and sidewalks – is already there. Density is bad when it's all low income. If mixed, density is great. Real neighborhoods are mixed. In real neighborhoods, residents are diverse in income level, age, occupation, household size, ethnic origin, religion, and other characteristics."

Rocky Marcoux's dynamic, optimistic talk and slide show, "The HOPE VI Program: The Changing Face of Public Housing in Milwaukee" enhanced HMI's annual meeting last June 17

-by Gail Fitch



Parklawn Housing Project

