



The following “white paper” concerning the preservation and revitalization of the West Urbana neighborhood has not been voted on by the West Urbana Neighborhood Association (WUNA) “voting” membership.

However, this “white paper” has been endorsed by WUNA’s Steering Group on January 20, 2005.

WUNA’s Steering Group

Liz Cardman, West California Avenue	Peggy Patten, West Indiana Street
Betsey Cronan, West High Street	Anne Silvis, West Pennsylvania Avenue
Kate Hunter, West Oregon Street	Stephanie Bury Sutton, South Orchard Street
Linda Lorenz, West High Street	Lisa Treul, West Iowa Street
Sonia Newmark, West Iowa Street	Joan Zagorski, South Race Street
Esther Patt, South Coler Avenue	

Steering group membership is open to any WUNA voting member who is willing to commit the time and resources to ensure WUNA’s mission.

WUNA’s Mission Statement

Our **mission** is to preserve the residential integrity of the neighborhood, while continuing to welcome a diverse mix of residents to its lovely, quiet, tree-lined streets. WUNA seeks to maintain and enhance the neighborhood's friendly, attractive, and safe environment that is within walking distance of downtown, campus, and excellent schools.

Preserving and Revitalizing the West Urbana Neighborhood

Many residents support a vision that not only preserves the historic West Urbana neighborhood, but also advocates re-development with smart growth policies that maintain the residential integrity of the neighborhood.

Across the country, elected officials and city staff in many college towns have worked to preserve their historic residential neighborhoods near campuses like West Urbana. “A paradigm shift is occurring in college towns across the country. Rejecting the ‘inevitable’ decline of neighborhoods adjacent to college and university campuses, increasing numbers of neighborhood associations, cities, and universities are actively working to revitalize neighborhoods near campuses. Planners and developers need to be aware of this ongoing trend.”¹

Preservation and enhancement of older neighborhoods near campuses face challenges. Smart growth policies must be evaluated in light of the realities and pressures of trends in college towns. Development opportunities next to campus are, as one real estate developer said, as desirable as “beachfront property.” There is a strong profit motive to “build cheap and rent high.” Both activities endanger the stability of a historic, residential neighborhood.

One need only drive to the Champaign neighborhood next to the University of Illinois campus to see that there is virtually no neighborhood of older homes left; in fact, the developers have replaced those homes with box like apartment buildings appealing only to students. Gone is the mix of people that creates a stable, diverse neighborhood. Many residents only live in their campus housing eight months a year and this contributes to the instability and transient nature of this neighborhood.

WUNA has invited the City of Urbana and the University of Illinois to join forces to preserve and enhance the West Urbana neighborhood.

The Formation of the University-Neighborhood-City (UNC) Group

In 2003, WUNA spearheaded a University-Neighborhood-City group to work toward this vision. The group was modeled on similar groups in other college towns. The UNC’s overall goals are:

- Improve the quality of life for all residents: students, university employees, community members, young families, and older residents
- Maintain an attractive campus gateway on both sides of Lincoln Avenue.
- Preserve the West Urbana residential neighborhood.
- Promote pride in property ownership and neighborhood residency.

¹ Planetizen web site, <http://www.planetizen.com/oped/item.php?id=51>.

The UNC group has made progress toward achieving these goals. It has accomplished the following:

- Created a pilot Good Neighborhood program with the area Greek Organizations.
- Researched and encouraged the City of Urbana to change ordinances regarding over-occupancy and rental registration programs.
- Advocated for the creation of a Hearing Officer to preside over zoning violation cases throughout Champaign County.
- Proposed channels for funding rehabilitation of rundown properties.
- Promoted West Urbana as an asset to recruitment and retention of faculty and staff at University of Illinois.

Although the UNC has made some progress, much work remains to preserve and enhance the West Urbana neighborhood.

Maintain a Solid Base of Owner-occupied, Single-family Residential Housing

In 1990, the Urbana City Council had the vision to pass the Downtown to Campus Plan. It was adopted because of a “growing concern that the neighborhood’s many single-family homes, historic characteristics and unique appearance are being lost.”² The Plan has been critical in maintaining the neighborhood one sees today.

Many residents advocate for a healthy balance between the number of owner-occupied, single-family homes and rental properties on a given block to maintain a thriving, vibrant neighborhood. Home ownership promotes and maintains stability and viability of residential neighborhoods. After all, both Habitat for Humanity and HUD recognize the importance of homeownership among lower income families because it creates stable and viable residential neighborhoods. Other benefits of a residential neighborhood like West Urbana are:

- Improved property maintenance.
- Increases in property values which in turn increases city tax revenues.
- A neighborhood in Urbana for those who value homes with historic features.
- A positive image for the campus gateway.
- A positive image of Urbana when traveling from campus-to-downtown Urbana.
- A positive image for potential homebuyers looking in Urbana.
- An environment for families with children to walk to neighborhood schools, our award-winning public library and our downtown.
- Year-round consumers for downtown Urbana shops, restaurants and Market in the Square.

² *Downtown to Campus Plan*, Adopted by the Urbana City Council, June 4, 1990, p.i.

University students enhance the vitality of life in West Urbana. Problems can occur, however, when rental properties dominate neighborhood blocks designed for owner-occupied, single family use. These problems include increased noise and traffic, limited parking availability, and drug and alcohol abuse at student houses when large social gatherings take place.

When these problems occur, the quality of life is degraded for all. If you were to move a well-maintained property located on Green, High, or Illinois Street farther south in West Urbana (that is predominantly owner-occupied, single-family residential), the tax revenue on that property would increase by 43%.³

In effect, the Urbana taxpayers are subsidizing profits on rentals in West Urbana.

Protect the Taxpayers Investment by Preserving the Neighborhood

The City of Urbana taxpayers have spent millions of dollars to renovate and expand Leal Elementary School, Urbana Middle School, Urbana Indoor Aquatic Center, Urbana High School and Urbana Free Library all located in the West Urbana neighborhood. The Urbana Board of Education has committed to maintain the middle school and high school in the city core rather than sprawled out on the city fringe, as has occurred across the country. By doing so, Urbana School District administrators have maintained quality schools to which children can walk. After dedicating so much money and effort to preserving these excellent schools and valued public facilities, it is now time to turn the focus on preserving and revitalizing West Urbana. Let's continue to surround our schools and other community facilities with a viable, safe, residential neighborhood.

³ Based on analysis of MLS sales within West Urbana, from January 2003 through September 2004 by Paul Debevec. There is a significant correlation between tax per sq. ft (or sale price per sq. ft) and distance from Green and Coler. Among the properties sold, the tax per sq. ft increases significantly with the distance from Green. There is little change in tax per sq. ft with the distance from Lincoln. Green and Coler were chosen as the reference point, but the reference point could be Green and most any cross street and we would have the same correlation. Note that for the sample of properties analyzed, there is no correlation between size of house and the distance from Green and Coler. Except for two very large houses on Michigan in the sample, the houses are very similar in size, namely about 1900 sq. ft.