

Robertson Neighborhood Description

Since the adoption of the town Plan of Development in 1986 no area has undergone as much change as the Robertson neighborhood. There has been unprecedented commercial growth in Buckland Hills starting in the late 1980's, and continuing through 1996. Also during the mid-1980's there was a spurt of growth in housing development, first in the Oakland/Parker Street area and then in Buckland Hills. These new developments were fit into an existing pattern of mixed land uses including single family residential subdivisions, multi-family developments, and existing industrial and commercial uses that have long characterized Manchester's northern tier.

The Robertson neighborhood as we have defined it includes all of the Robertson school district and the industrial areas along Adams Street, New State Road and I-84 to the west. The Robertson neighborhood as we define it is very large, and it is interesting to note that this neighborhood is not predominately residential. The percentages of land in industrial, commercial, and residential use are roughly one-third each.

It is also worth noting that while in some of the older neighborhoods development preceded zoning, in the Robertson neighborhood for the most part zoning preceded development. The town has over the years changed the zoning of the land which was predominately either low density residential or rural residential, to commercial, industrial or medium density residential uses. To the extent that this land use pattern is now established, and given the fact that there is limited vacant residential land, it appears that a trend toward medium density development will continue given existing approvals. Since most of the commercial and residential areas are already zoned and developed what remains is the infill of the residential development pattern which currently calls for medium and medium high density development, and infill of commercial, industrial or mixed uses along the I-84 corridor. Some consideration to reduce the proposed residential density in light of approved developments and current strains in the school system has been suggested.

As the available land along Tolland Turnpike and North Main Street continues to develop the residential land uses and the population will increase. Because of the very large area of the Robertson neighborhood and the fragmented residential development pattern, it is doubtful that most residents would relate to the neighborhood boundary as we have defined it. Indeed, what we observe from studying area land uses and from the attendance at our neighborhood meetings is that the Robertson area is a grouping of small, often isolated sub-neighborhoods.

This isolation is first of all a physical one, with some sub-neighborhoods bounded by major highways or non-residential uses. Isolation also results from the self-containment of many multi-family or single family residential developments; most with no interconnecting streets between developments. The Bryan Farms and Croft Drive/Burnham Street neighborhoods are examples of small residential pockets isolated by highways or non-residential uses. Much of the housing on Tolland Turnpike and North Main Street is older, and was built when these east/west streets were essentially rural routes serving active agricultural sites that had little surrounding development.

Union Village is a late 1800's worker housing neighborhood with obvious historic value to Manchester. The neighborhood is bounded by Union Street on the west, North School Street on the east, North Main Street on the south, and Kerry Street on the north. The Oakland Street corridor was originally a strip of single family detached homes and some commercial uses. Over the years it has developed as a series of self-contained multi-family projects. These range from market rate condominium developments and rental property to federally assisted housing. Each project has its own entrance from Oakland Street and is generally screened and buffered from the adjacent property.

The Parker Street area is primarily an industrial and commercial area, with a notable exception of the Parker Village single family housing development and the Town Homes at Stoney Brook condominiums. These Parker Street developments were built in the 1980's during the residential building boom, and developed at about the same time as the industrial property to the east and south.

The Robertson neighborhood as we have defined it has the majority of the commercial and industrial land in town. Major business activity areas include the Buckland Industrial Park; the Buckland Hills retail area; Parker Street Industrial Parks; and strip commercial development on the eastern end of Tolland Turnpike. These areas are major regional shopping and employment destinations, generating high traffic volumes. Their locations adjacent to residential areas contributes to a fragmented development pattern.

Aggravating the physical isolation is a lack of physical connections to common destinations. On the eastern end of the neighborhood the Robertson School (including the swimming pool and the play fields), Union Pond Park, Whiton Library, and the Community Y are major neighborhood destinations. The Buckland Hills shopping complex, and the developing Tolland Turnpike area are major neighborhood destinations as well. Pedestrian systems are not fully developed here.

Given the number of young families, young children and teenagers in the area, a more complete sidewalk and/or bikeway system is warranted. Oakland Street and the Union Street/Tolland Turnpike area in particular deserve attention in the near to mid-term. Well worn footpaths indicate heavy pedestrian use on Oakland Street, yet sidewalks here only exist abutting recent (mid-70's forward) developments. Extending sidewalks is problematic here given that Oakland Street (state Route 83) is a state road and state requirements for sidewalks and snow shelves may need to be relaxed. Safe sidewalks along Tolland Turnpike, Union Street, and North Main Street connecting these residential areas to the major destinations would provide safer walking conditions and, more importantly, could begin to knit the neighborhood together.

The Robertson neighborhood is built off of a strong east/west and north/south arterial roadway system, and is a major access to Interstate 84 as well as to industrial and commercial areas. The relationship of these streets to travel to work, shopping and services introduces large amounts of traffic to the area during peak travel times. This affects all residential areas in the neighborhood, and levels of service at peak times are at or near capacity.

Also, the pace of development and attendant improvements to the street system over the past

seven years of rapid commercial (and earlier residential) growth is disruptive. Until development activity stabilizes it will be difficult to fully gauge how traffic conditions can be improved. Town sponsored improvements to Oakland Street, Parker Street, and North Main Street should improve capacity and safety at key locations, while developer funded improvements should keep roads operating at current levels of service as development and destinations grow. In any event, high traffic volumes will continue to be a characteristic of the area.

As the population in the neighborhood continues to grow, (it is expected that there will be more multi-family development toward the western end near Buckland Street, and smaller single or two-family developments on Union Street and Tolland Turnpike), the need for pedestrian systems will increase. Likewise, a need for open space and recreational activities will increase. Fortunately, the Robertson neighborhood has a number of town-owned open space resources which can be utilized.

Union Pond, which recently saw the development of Union Pond Park and in the near future will see the development of a park at its north western end, is a tremendous scenic and recreational asset. The Robertson School area also has the potential to be improved to meet the growing recreational needs of the neighborhood. Suggestions for repairing the lighting at the basketball courts, improving play facilities, and expanding activities at the Community Y are among the possibilities that can be pursued.

Also, there is a potential to add bikeway systems over the mid- to long-term in the Oakland Street and Tolland Turnpike areas which could connect to possible state bikeways off of Parker Street, and the bikeway located in the Buckland Hills area.

The Hockanum River Linear Park is a major recreational feature in the neighborhood, as well as a community wide asset. Hiking trails along the river and around Union Pond are heavily used. As park development continues this will be an important recreational resource and another physical connection for the neighborhood. The proposed northwest park will receive more detailed study as part of the open space section of the Comprehensive Plan of Development update, but its relationship to the neighborhood should be considered during that process.

The Robertson area has a population which is varied racially and economically. The residential development pattern in the neighborhood is fragmented, and because these developments are targeted to different economic levels, there is also a socioeconomic fragmentation. This may lead to a weak sense of community or to a tendency to view one's neighborhood in small units (e.g. the apartment complex or the single family subdivision).

The neighborhood has a relatively large minority population compared to the town, and provides a larger amount of affordable market housing and government assisted housing.

In our interviews with school administrators, town departments and division heads, and nonprofit service providers, the move toward more racial and ethnic minorities, more families on some form of assistance, more single parent households, and more working poor households is a dominant trend and is expected to continue.

The pressures associated with these demographic changes are reflected at Robertson School. There are high percentages of children on the free or reduced lunch program. There are also increasing numbers of children or households under some form of stress. There is a perceived need for better health care and nutrition; more before and after school activities; and innovative ways to encourage parental involvement in the school system and the community.

If these trends continue it will be important to involve the residents, and especially the Robertson School community, in a joint effort with the school administration and the town, to create a greater sense of community and ensure that proper amounts and types of services are provided. Community building and resident involvement, coupled with improving physical facilities and pedestrian connections, can begin to give the Robertson neighborhood a new identity and place within the overall community.