

West Side Neighborhood Profile Summary

The West Side is one of Manchester's oldest neighborhoods, and architecturally and historically, one of its richest. Located in the heart of town it is convenient to shops, services, highways, and public transit. On three sides, the edges of the neighborhood (Main Street, Center Street, and Hartford Road) are dominated by commercial properties. The residential area inside these boundaries has a variety of housing types and architectural styles. Large buildings set close to the streets on relatively small lots create a well-defined and "human scale" public space. The majority of homes and buildings are well-maintained, a reflection of the pride people have in their homes and neighborhood.

The neighborhood developed on a grid street pattern. These narrow streets, usually with sidewalks on both sides, harken back to a time when most people walked to work or shopping or took public transit. Schools, churches, parks, libraries, shopping and services were, and remain, easily accessible on foot. These physical characteristics contribute to the traditional family oriented, old fashioned neighborhood "feel" identified as a strength by long-time residents. The fact that it is a walkable neighborhood adds to a sense of comfort and security.

Almost one-half of the neighborhood is or could be in the Cheney Brothers National Landmark District. Manchester and the West Side received this honorary designation because of the abundance and integrity of significant industrial and residential architecture, and because the neighborhood represented an outstanding example of an early utopian industrial community. The mills, mansions, and worker housing represent a major development influence on the West Side. This authenticity and integrity contributes to the sense that residents are living in a special place.

Paradoxically, the very fact that the neighborhood is old and traditional and was built at a time when family structure and size, and shopping, employment and transportation patterns were very different from today, contain the seeds of many of the neighborhood's present problems. The large old homes are sometimes too large for today's families or are too difficult to maintain for older owners. Many two- to four-family homes which once had owner-occupants as landlords have recently been sold to absentee landlords. The age of the housing obviates the need for rehabilitation, and what were once considered state of the art materials (such as lead-based paint and asbestos) are now considered hazards and liabilities. In some parts of the West Side, this combination of factors has led to deteriorating conditions. The age of public streets and sidewalks, and their disrepair, adds to poor overall appearance in certain areas. Another paradox is that efforts to renovate many of the older properties using modern materials such as vinyl siding are eroding the integrity of much of the residential and commercial architecture in the neighborhood.

In addition to the physical changes, the demographics of the neighborhood have changed. Residents (especially long-time ones) recognize that the West Side has always been an ethnically diverse neighborhood going back to the heyday of the Cheney Mills when immigrants arrived here to work. However, today the relatively lower cost of housing and the high percentage of rental units have combined to create a sense that the West Side is a stopover or transient neighborhood for young people and lower income persons and families. These latest arrivals, it is felt, don't have an appreciation of the neighborhood's history nor any stake in being involved in the neighborhood. There is also a sense that there are communities within the community based upon race, socioeconomic status, class, or other factors. Residents believe it is important to find ways to make everyone appreciate and be involved in the neighborhood.

There are also growing numbers of single parent households, younger households and families with special needs for economic or social support. These socioeconomic issues are reflected in Washington School, which has a higher percentage of minority children, higher percentage of school lunch program participants, and lower test scores than other elementary schools in the system.

For many residents there is also a perception that crime, especially loitering, vandalism, and gang activity, is on the rise in the West Side. Thus while many believe the neighborhood is safe, comfortable and friendly, there is

still a demand for greater police presence, higher street lighting levels at night, and more structured and supervised activities for children and teenagers.

The late 1980's and early 1990's were a period of dynamic change in the West Side. It has a number of inherent strengths: its location, architecture, physical form, heritage and access to services among them. The major asset is the commitment of a growing number of residents, neighborhood institutions, and the town government to become directly involved in the issues facing the West Side.

Many activities dealing with a range of issues are already underway on the West Side. Among the most noteworthy are:

After School Recreation Program: The Manchester Park and Recreation Department is proposing in the fiscal year 1994/95 budget to establish an after school recreation program based on Project Right Choice, the successful after school program at Nathan Hale. This program will be offered to school age children and will provide structured activity for recreational, and educational benefits as well as activities to improve self-esteem and decision-making skills.

Youth Violence Prevention Program: In March 1994 the town was notified that it had been awarded a youth violence prevention grant. This grant will be used to develop training and early identification and intervention activities to deal with the problem of youth violence. The program will be focused on those agencies serving the resident population in the East and West Side neighborhoods. The program will also hire neighborhood residents to provide outreach and services, an important community based component of this program. This is a timely intervention and addresses the residents' concerns over crime, gang activity, and vandalism in the neighborhood.

Expanded Services at Washington School: The Washington School administration, teachers, and PTA have proposed several programs intended to deal with low test scores and other issues at Washington School. Among the proposals put forth and endorsed by the School Board are an all day kindergarten program, maintaining the current staffing level, and carrying out a plan to improve test scores.

Family Support Center: Located in the Washington School this center offers counseling, skill development, and support for parents. Although located in Washington School, the center is available to anyone in the community. Efforts are underway to expand the services offered here. More aggressive outreach to the families in the neighborhood to make them aware of the program is needed as some social service agencies believe the need for the services is greater than the existing caseloads indicate.

Community Policing Program: Manchester Police Department was successful in securing a federal grant which will enable the department to place two community policing officers in the neighborhood. The community policing officers will be assigned in the West Side with an emphasis on developing good working relationships with residents and helping them to solve problems.

West Side Block Watch: Perhaps one of the most important new activities in the neighborhood is the emergence of an active block watch group. Since organizing in the winter of 1993, the block watch meetings have drawn over 70 people. The block watch network was formed out of concerns for crime in the neighborhood, but based upon the neighborhood planning work, we believe the block watch organization should change its name and broaden its focus to deal with a variety of issues in the neighborhood. The developing network of block captains can form the core of a neighborhood organization which could not only work effectively with the community police officers, but could organize to carry out many of the recommendations of this plan. The

involvement of the block watch group and the residents who attended the neighborhood meetings are critical to the success of any revitalization of the West Side.

Historic Properties Inventory: The town will conduct a historic properties inventory on the West Side to identify architecturally and historically significant buildings or places. This will complement the Cheney Historic District and could be used as a tool to educate residents about their neighborhood.

New Hope Manor: This agency is proposing an expansion of services to the West Side as part of its request for town funding. In addition to the counseling services at New Hope's offices on Hartford Road, the expanded services would include more work with children at Washington School, identification of families with special needs, and the design and implementation of support groups to meet those needs.