



HIGHLAND AVENUE: Cleaning up a legacy

By **Dan Miner/minerd@gnewspaper.com**
Niagara Gazette

— Driving through the Highland Avenue neighborhood with Alan Nusbaum and Willie Dunn can feel like a study in optimism.

To Dunn, executive director of the Highland Community Revitalization Committee, every empty factory is an opportunity, the streets are safer than they once were and a sense of community is reemerging among residents.

“I think there is tremendous potential for this community to grow,” he said. “There’s families that want to have nice homes. There’s people willing to build in the community.”

But despite the hopeful tone, Dunn can’t help but mention the neighborhood’s low-income shackles. Riding past a large, newly built home on Virginia Avenue, Dunn swells with pride that the new owners chose the Highland neighborhood. But, he adds, loans to build the house were extremely difficult to come by — a problem which doesn’t exist along the tree-lined streets of DeVeaux, just across the real and symbolic railroad tracks.

The high-crime label still exists for the area and there are too many renter-occupied homes, Dunn says. For all of its numerous challenges, none looms larger than the hundreds of acres of brownfields, ranging from sprawling, abandoned factory sites to small plots of land once used by small businesses.

Thus the purpose for the neighborhood tour: To explain a \$400,000 state grant that Dunn, Nusbaum, who is a volunteer in the city’s Planning Department, and a host of other interested parties say will create a community-based plan to revive the neighborhood, bringing investment and jobs.

“It’s a really, really important opportunity for the community to begin to define their own future,” said Mark Reid, a consultant with Urban Strategies Inc., the Toronto-based firm hired by the City of Niagara Falls to work on the project. “That’s always exciting for any community.”

Money to go towards master plan

The city received word in Fall 2004 that it had been awarded the Brownfield Opportunity Area grant from the state Department of Conservation for the Highland neighborhood. Almost three years later, in summer 2007, the funds finally became available.

In the end, the program will produce a master plan for the area’s brownfields, including a comprehensive environmental review, possible future uses of properties and a summary of tax credit and funding opportunities for area businesses. The entire process should wrap up in Spring 2009.

But those involved say the plan’s effectiveness depends wholly on community involvement. The best people to decide a neighborhood’s future are the people who live there, said Zach Casale, a member of the Main Street Business Association who’s also working on the project as part of his graduate studies in planning at the University of Buffalo.

That’s why hopes are high for tonight’s meeting, a kickoff event from 6 to 8 p.m. today at the Doris W. Jones Family Resource Building on Ninth Street.

“The plan is coming from the people,” Casale said. “We’ll have the expertise of professionals to guide and show the way to do this, but you don’t want people from out-of-state to say this is what we’re going to do.

Reasons to invest

In terms of tax discounts, it would be hard to find an area in which more are available to businesses than the Highland neighborhood. It’s officially designated a federal Renewal Community, which provides employment tax credits and capital gains exclusion, and a state Empire Zone. Those programs have used to create several success stories in the area. Those include:

n Standard Auto Wreckers: A Canadian-based company which buys and takes apart used vehicles and then sells their parts, purchased a 170,000-square-foot site at 3800 Highland Ave. in Feb. 2006. They employ 30

full-time workers.

n Braun Horticulture: Another Canadian-based company which has been at its Highland Avenue location since 1988. Braun recently expanded across the street to a larger facility.

“(Both designations) are really catching on, marketing-wise,” said Ralph Aversa, executive director of NFC Corp., the city’s lending arm. “If I were a business today, I’d be in both.”

The state also offers its Brownfield Cleanup Program, offering tax breaks in return for cleaning up and redeveloping brownfields. Alternatives Resources Management Inc., an affiliate of Falls-based Santarosa Holdings Inc., has been accepted into the program. The company plans to renovate 13 acres of the old Union Carbide Co. site at 1501 College Ave. and create as many as 75 new jobs for its businesses, which involves shredding scrap vehicle tires to produce various rubber products and recyclable metal.”

Bringing HOPE to the community

Further optimism has been spurred by recent activity, including the HOPE VI and Unity Park housing projects, the future construction of a police substation and community resource center and a proposed International Rail Station and Intermodal Transportation Center on Lewiston Road.

Nearby, on Main Street, a \$44.6 million public safety complex is under construction and the North Star at the North End movement is aimed at turning the street into a cultural heritage attraction.

“Highland is a community that was literally built around our industrial heritage,” said Henry Taylor, who is the director of the Center for Urban Studies at the University at Buffalo and is involved with the program.

“When many of these buildings and industries left, they left behind buildings and structures not used along with the resources that went with them. But they also left huge obstacles that stand in the way of that neighborhood being able to develop itself.”

IF YOU GO

- WHAT: Highland Avenue Brownfield Opportunity Area Open House
- WHEN: 6 to 8 p.m., today
- WHERE: Doris W. Jones Family Resource Building, 3001 Ninth St.
- MORE INFO: Call 465-1515

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