

Editorial: Revitalizing Worcester's three-decker neighborhoods

Posted Jan 14, 2018 at 6:00 AM

Figuratively rolling up our sleeves and addressing Worcester's housing issues is a must, restoring not just the bones and sinews of structures and public works but also the heart and soul of what makes a neighborhood into, well, a neighborhood, one that's more than just a collection of housing units. We're talking about beautification, certainly, but also a communal identity that makes it home.

At one time many of the city's neighborhoods revolved around ethnic identities, with a church or synagogue and always a neighborhood school, all within walking distance, to knit together the fabric of neighborhood life. It was a life ordered around growing families of boomer kids supported by a burgeoning midcentury city of more than 200,000 people, and with good paying jobs in commerce and industry, sometimes also within walking distance. Neighbors knew each other, kept an eye on each other's kids. There were neighborhood municipal pools and branch libraries. And the major safety concern seemed to be kids playing safely around the streets.

The picture today is markedly different. Look to the decline of owner-occupied three-deckers, signature housing stock that almost rings the urban core; or to society's increased mobility, which has overturned the once-common model of two or even three generations of a family occupying their own floors of a three-decker. Look to the opioid epidemic, which has stretched its tendrils everywhere. And to street gangs. Look to the prostitution that afflicts areas such as Main South. Look to city demographics in which more than a quarter of Worcester's residents are living below the poverty line. Look also, despite their bringing in needed services, to the ability of nonprofits to move in to a neighborhood despite zoning requirements that would affect everyone else and in small ways begin to change its character.

Let's just say upfront that Worcester is a wonderful city, a safe city. It's a Gateway City that's in far better shape than any other.

But Mayor Joseph M. Petty was spot-on in his inaugural speech about the need to revitalize Worcester's once-vibrant three-decker neighborhoods. We have problems that must be addressed. But his remarks also pointed to something that makes this a bit different from midcentury Worcester in pointing to housing needs of seniors looking to downsize and the growing number of young professionals looking for housing.

Making all this work in the current context is an enormous challenge. It's an even bigger challenge given the need to address neighborhood improvement in a meaningful way while at the same time continuing the city's momentum downtown.

The remaking of the urban core is very much a work still in progress. Much attention must be paid in keeping the momentum there moving forward, including the reimagining and remaking of Main Street, and accommodating the more than 500 units of downtown housing being privately developed in CitySquare, the Central Building and the former courthouse, and in attracting the kind of businesses downtown that will keep this new urban residential neighborhood vibrant on its own terms. This must include repair or reconstruction of the embarrassingly maintained Pearl-Elm municipal parking garage. The Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce just called out the city to provide a detailed timeline on when downtown businesses can get the facility they deserve. As the city continues to set property tax rates close to the max, while charging residential properties the low rate, the least businesses should expect is a better facility than this.

And of course, Worcester's gains in the public school system must continue.

But the city's three-decker neighborhoods also need attention, including a different way of thinking that comes not just from the city but also from the grass-roots levels. As outlined in last week's Politics and the City column by Nick Kotsopoulos, three quarters of the city's housing stock is 50 years or older, nearly half the housing stock nearly 80 years or older. Neighborhoods with owner-occupied homes are the gold standard. Too many three-deckers are owned as investment properties by absentee owners. The city needs to develop a way to change that dynamic and encourage owner-occupied housing. One possibility might be to tax investment properties that are not occupied by their owners more like the business investments that they are. A different issue, and they certainly have the right, involves owner-occupied three-deckers, mostly by seniors who have paid off the mortgage and who live with one or two vacant floors rather than take on the potential hassle and uncertainty of renting. Are there ways here for the city to provide assistance and incentives?

In another direction, would the city use tax-increment financing opportunities with a developer or group of owners to make an impact on neighborhoods? Or establish a grant program? How can the city partner with groups such as Preservation Worcester and other civic organizations to identify, help upgrade and restore three-decker neighborhoods. And to bring more events not just to downtown but to neighborhoods as well.

And here's a test. Will the City Council resolve the issue of recyclables getting blown around neighborhoods every time the wind blows? Worcester is ringed by hills that catch and direct winds. Either get covers or covered containers, or move to bags. Yes it will cost, but residents who are unhappy with blowing trash should be willing to pay a modest amount for something like clear bags, which once were successful a pilot program. The will to fix something like this for all neighborhoods would be a great start to tackling even bigger issues.