

HISTORIC PRESERVATION

SULLEBARGER ASSOCIATES HISTORIC PRESERVATION CONSULTANTS

June 16, 2006

Mr. David Moore, Municipal Administrator
Village of Greenhills
11000 Winton Road
Greenhills, OH 45218-1198

Dear David:

Thank you for engaging my services to consult on issues of preservation and new development in Greenhills. I enjoyed the very thorough tour you gave me on May 26.

Qualifications

I have 30 years of experience in historic preservation, including seven years as Executive Director of the Cincinnati Preservation Association and five years with the City of Cincinnati's Historic Conservation Office. I received an M.S. in Historic Preservation from Columbia University in 1981 and have served on the Cincinnati Historic Conservation Board for ten years. I have substantial experience working with local governments, architects, developers and nonprofit organizations on historic rehabilitation projects including historic structure reports, preservation plans, historic tax credit applications, nominations to the National Register of Historic Places, environmental review, historic inventories, and design guidelines.

Significance of Greenhills

A substantial portion of Greenhills was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1988. The nomination prepared by Rita Walsh focused on the initial construction between 1935 and 1938, which met the 50-year age requirement at the time. The nomination included the original 676 dwelling units in the A, B, C, D, and F sections, along with the community, recreation and church-related buildings. Sixty-eight buildings within the boundaries of the nomination were considered non-contributing at the time because they were built after 1938. Greenhills continued to be developed with residential and commercial buildings in the 1940s through the 1970s reaching a total of 1685 dwelling units by 2000.

Greenhills' significance is primarily historic, as one of only three Greenbelt planned communities built in the United States during the New Deal era. The original plan is basically intact; its characteristics include curving streets, walking paths, superblocks, and the encircling greenbelt. Amenities such as the retail center, golf course and swimming pool were provided to create a complete community. There is also a variety of housing types with 33 different interior plans.

Greenhills began with construction of some attractive slate-roofed brick houses with modest Colonial Revival styling in the B section. Because of cost, however, a shift occurred during development to barracks-like structures of cheaper frame construction with asbestos siding and a minimum of detail and amenities.

Single-family homes, originally only in the A and B sections, are typically gable-roofed with an attached or integral garage. There are also one- and two-story duplexes, some with central garages connecting two housing units; multi-family brick row buildings with four to eight units with either slate-covered gabled roofs or flat roofs; and the "S" type row buildings seen in the C, D and F sections—flat-roofed, asbestos-sided with porch projections and no basements. Three-story residences, found only in the B section, have brick exteriors or a combination of brick first floor and stucco upper floors. Another type of row building seen in all the residential blocks consists of two staggered rectangular sections sheathed in a brick/stucco combination or asbestos siding.

In terms of architectural styles, the National Register nomination cites solid brick exteriors and slate-covered, gabled roofs as characteristic of Colonial Revival, and smooth stucco walls, flat roofs, and flat-roofed porches supported by slender metal columns as typical of the International Style. There is no doubt, however, that the buildings in Greenhills are very modest examples of both those styles because of the extreme economy controlling their construction.

G. Frank Cordner, Principal Architect for the project from 1935 to 1938, did not use any stylistic terms in his report on "Architectural Planning, Greenhills, Ohio," in November 1937. His lengthy description instead goes into great detail about the variations of the sizes and plans of the Units, standard finishes and components such as steel windows, closets, utility rooms, basements and garages. He acknowledges that "the character and scope, the quantity and to a lesser extent, the quality, of the building program have had to be substantially modified during the progress of construction and planning to meet the limitations of available funds and at the same time approximate the original goal."

Challenges

The Village is faced with several challenges related to the character and quality of its historic buildings. As a first suburb in Hamilton County, it competes for residents with newer suburbs in Butler and Warren counties, which offer new housing with more space and more amenities. An article by Alan Ehrenhalt entitled "The Bungalow Bind" in the June 2006 issue of *Governing* magazine describes a study by William Lucy and David Phillips, professors of urban planning at the University of Virginia, which documents that neighborhoods with houses built during the 1950s and '60s deteriorated rapidly during the 1990s, because their average size, at 1100 square feet, is significantly smaller than what buyers can find in the newer suburbs.

At 1120 square feet, the average gross area per dwelling unit in Greenhills is of the size that is experiencing decline. With the passage of 70 years, rental housing, especially the "S" houses of cheaper construction, has become deteriorated and a few bad tenants have brought undesirable activities into the Village. Today there are 415 rental units or about 25% of the remaining total 1638 units in the Village. The Administrator considers 15 to 20% rentals a much healthier amount.

The Village Response

In response to the physical deterioration and declining market for small housing units, the Greenhills administration decided to take action to save the community. The Village acquired 125 units in 7 buildings. It renovated and resold 5 units and hopes to do the same with 5 more units in the A and B blocks this year. However, in the process of inspecting the condition of four multi-family buildings in the D section with consulting architect Pete Deere, the Village discovered that the wood sheathing underneath was extensively rotted. The removal and safe disposal of the asbestos siding is an environmental hazard regulated by the EPA, and replacing the sheathing and siding presented a prohibitive cost to the Village. Photographs show the extremely deteriorated condition of these buildings, which were demolished. The demolition of 32 units on this block represents less than 5 percent of the original 676 housing units built in the 1930s. While this does not represent a sufficient loss to cause delisting of Greenhills from the National Register, it is cause for concern in maintaining the historic character of the community.

DeWitt Landing

The Village contracted with a local developer to build 16 single-family homes on Drummond and DeWitt Streets where the four buildings were razed. The development, known as Dewitt Landing, was built by Potterhill Homes. The new houses are traditional American designs with access to garages from an alley in the interior of the block. They are attractive and intentionally inspired by historic house types. However, they differ from the original buildings in style, occupancy, footprint and lot size. They are more consistent with the small single-family brick houses across Drummond Street, but they are taller and differ in materials and style.

In part, the difference is a response to the stronger market for single-family houses over attached dwellings. Even in the 1930s, a survey of future residents done by the Research Section of the Suburban Resettlement Division showed that two-thirds (67.8%) preferred single-family houses, while 26.7% preferred Row Houses and only 5.5% preferred apartments. The preference for single-family houses still holds true today. These dwellings tend to be owner-occupied and well-maintained.

Recommendations

I share the concerns of historic preservation advocates about the protection of the significance of Greenhills. At the same time, I understand the challenges the Village is facing and commend the Administration for being pro-active in keeping Greenhills a viable community. Following are recommendations for you to consider.

Design of New Housing

Based on prohibitive cost of rehabilitation and new market demands, some original housing will have to be replaced. However, in order to preserve the historic character of Greenhills, it may be desirable to base the design of new housing more closely on existing models within the village such as the more attractive brick houses with gabled roofs in the B section. It may even be possible to imitate the "courtyard" configuration with new row-buildings to create a unified and attractive effect. It is also important to preserve the existing lots and

configuration of streets, walking paths and plantings wherever possible. Consider consulting with preservation advocates and experts to build consensus on the design.

Improvements to Existing Housing

It is desirable to convert existing rental housing to owner-occupied units. It is easy to observe that owner-occupied units in the Village are much better maintained than rentals. There are many private developers renovating old buildings Cincinnati and converting them to condominiums, particularly in downtown, Over-the-Rhine, and Camp Washington. Perhaps one or more could be recruited to purchase village-owned properties for renovation and conversion to owner-occupancy.

New landscaping amenities could improve the exterior appearance of rental units, such as expanded patios and outdoor storage. Buildings with backs facing Winton Road present an unkempt appearance with toys, grills and other objects strewn on the common lawn.

New Urbanism and Amenities

With its curving streets, ample green space, walking paths, small scale and mixed uses, Greenhills is a historic example of the New Urbanist model which is fashionable in new communities. Many new housing subdivisions offer amenities such as pools and golf courses to attract new residents. Greenhills was way ahead of the curve in this aspect and can use its New Urbanist amenities and its pool and golf course to help market existing and new housing for rental and sale.

Shopping Center

Of all the buildings in the Village, the shopping center presents the most dilapidated appearance and negative image. Its location on Winton Road, a major thoroughfare, makes it very visible. If the owner continues to be unwilling to sell, explore enforcement of maintenance codes, receivership and eminent domain as ways to gain control of the property. The building's appearance could be greatly enhanced by installing consistent and attractive signage. Perhaps a facade improvement program with financial assistance could be a relatively inexpensive way of enhancing its appearance.

It may be possible to convert all or part of the space for use as small office park similar to examples on Chesterdale and Nilles Road. The nearby golf course could be an asset for doing business. Demolition and replacement is a last resort.

Design Guidelines and Review

While Greenhills is listed in the National Register and valued by its residents as a historic community, the Village has no public Design Review process. National Register-listing does not provide that control; it must be established at the local level. A Design Review process with clear and easy-to-follow guidelines could provide the tools to address issues of compatibility of new construction and appropriateness of alterations. Regulations could also clarify when demolition is acceptable or not. If there isn't sufficient expertise within the community, a qualified consultant could advise the Village.

Heritage Tourism

Preserving the integrity of Greenhills could benefit the Village by supporting local pride as well as tourism. I understand that you get a fair number of preservationists, architects, planning students and New Deal devotees who want to see Greenhills. Perhaps it is possible, by working with the Greenhills Historical Society, Cincinnati Preservation Association and others to capitalize on this to a greater extent to help develop public awareness, attract new residents, and bring in new revenue to local businesses.

Summary of Recommendations

1. For properties acquired carefully document the conditions and cost of renovation vs. the *cost* of demolition and new construction. In cases where prohibitive cost is documented, demolish deteriorated housing.
2. Design new construction to resemble historic buildings types more closely.
3. Recruit developers to renovate and convert existing rental housing to owner-occupied units.
4. Provide new landscaping amenities such as expanded patios and outdoor storage to improve the appearance of rental units.
5. Market Greenhills as an old "New Urbanist" community with amenities such as public green space, pathways, pool and golf course to attract new residents.
6. Improve the shopping center. At a minimum, work with tenants to install consistent and attractive new signs. Consider conversion to small office park.
7. Consider adopting a Design Review process with design guidelines. This could involve creating an advisory committee of individuals with expertise related to historic preservation.
8. Develop a Heritage Tourism program.

I would be happy to help Greenhills in the implementation of any of these recommendations. Thanks again for calling on me.

With best wishes,



Beth Sullebarger
Principal