



HISTORIC BELLE GROVE SQUARE NEIGHBORHOOD

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**Belle Grove Square
Neighborhood
Planning Meeting**

**Thurs., Aug. 19th
at 7:00pm**

**St. Paul's UCC
Bond & Green Sts.
- Enter on Green St. -**

**Join in and help your
great BGS neighbors
plan for the future!**

What a difference a coat of paint makes...

by Mitchell Edmondson

As most of you know, Bruce and I have had some exterior work done on our house. For many years the old house on the corner of Park Avenue and West Green Streets sat quietly as the squirrels gnawed holes in the eaves, paint peeled, and shutters sagged. Like most other things in life, the passing of time has a way of wearing down old houses - gutters rust, windows get broken, and siding starts to decay. For some old structures, the wrecking ball comes calling and structures that once played a vital role in the community disappear. Sometimes the old buildings are beyond repair, but other times they are rescued and brought back to life. Maybe now our old house might be around for another hundred years or more. It seems to take a lot of time and money to renovate an old house; however, as someone who admires old houses I believe it is worth the effort to preserve our past.

The reason bring up the subject of renovating and preserving old

houses is because many survey respondents this year expressed an interest in historic preservation. Currently our neighborhood resides in a National Historic District which includes about 1400 structures. While this designation helps us qualify for some preservation tax credits, it does nothing to protect and preserve our neighborhood. In fact, Westminster only has two structures that have historic preservation status. One is a business on Main Street and the other is a private house on Pennsylvania. Uniontown is the only community in Carroll County that has a mapped historic preservation zone. It was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1986.

Speaking of the survey, we are devoting almost all of this month's newsletter to share the results of the survey we took last month. During our National Night Out ice cream social we had a chance to visit with Mayor Utz and other city officials about our neighborhood and its concerns. City officials were very interested in our survey

and requested that we share the results with them. One of the best things about being an organized neighborhood is that we can present our ideas and concerns to the city with one voice. As one of the city staff who came to our National Night Out pointed out, Belle Grove Square is the only neighborhood with an organized association and bylaws.

In the past few weeks I have had an opportunity to visit with someone from almost every house in our neighborhood. From the many conversations that I have had with residents it becomes apparent that most folks are excited about the direction our neighborhood is taking and are happy and proud to live in this part of Westminster. Since our neighborhood's birth in 1866 when George Matthews bought the plot of land that eventually became Historic Belle Grove Square, our neighborhood has played a role in the history of Westminster and will always be a vital part of the downtown historic district.

Upcoming Events

Band Concert Aug 22

On Sunday, August 22nd at 6:00pm, the Westminster Municipal Band will host a free concert at Belle Grove Square Park. Last year's event was very well attended and the crowd of city citizenry really loved it.

The band was formed in 1893 as the Westminster City Band. In 1916, many members of the band went into the Maryland National Guard under the heading "First Regimental Band of Maryland National Guard" and were sent to the Mexican Border. Then in 1918, the band went to France for WWI. After the war, those returning members and those who remained behind reformed the band into the "Westminster Band".

In 1950, the tan uniforms were changed to the Green and Gold that they now wear. It was then that the band reorganized under the current name "Westminster Municipal Band" and the city government pledged some financial support. A Color Guard was added in 1961 and is now the band's trade mark.

Many changes have taken place including the introduction of female members in 1984. Today, the band has members from several counties in Maryland and from Pennsylvania and Virginia. The band's schedule is primarily active in the summer months with many small parades and with the Maryland State Firemen's Convention in Ocean City, Md. The band has attended that parade and convention since 1957, and celebrated its 100th anniversary in May of 1993.

Worship in the Park

Sunday, September 5 the two neighborhood churches will celebrate with their annual joint worship service in Belle Grove Square Park at 9:30am. St. Paul's UCC at Bond and Green Streets and Westminster Church of the Brethren will work together to conduct the service.

Holiday Home Tour Update - Dec 11th

Westminster's Holiday Home tour will be held around Belle Grove Square this year on December 11.

Eight homes have volunteered to be on the tour, and the whole neighborhood will be pitching in to help decorate the square and area in preparation for the tour.

For those home owners whose homes will be on the tour, now is the time to put together a paragraph or two on your home's history for the tour program. Please email the summaries to bruce@bellegrovesquare.org or drop them off at 1 Park Avenue so we can coordinate with the Historic District Commission in putting together the program. We really need to have these in within the next few weeks.

Also, be thinking about docents or volunteers to help out at your homes and who may be available that day to assist.

The neighborhood meeting October 21 at 7:00pm at St. Paul's UCC will be devoted to the upcoming home tour and preparations underway.

If your home is not on the tour, there are a number of ways you can help and we really need everyone's help to make it a successful tour. You can help by volunteering at one of the homes on the tour, or by decorating the fronts of the neighborhood houses for the holidays.

Wanted: Plastic Bottles for the Tour

We also will need neighbors to start saving half gallon milk containers and two liter bottles.

Empty out any remaining contents and rinse with water, then set them aside and save them please for the home tour - volunteers will cut the collected bottles in half and use them to construct luminiers to light the way around the area for the tour.

Start saving now, and we'll provide instructions on where to drop them off as the tour approaches!

2010 Survey

by Bruce DeVault

The preliminary results from the July 2010 neighborhood survey are in. The neighborhood association's goal in conducting the survey is to gather feedback on how the neighborhood is doing, and to identify possible next steps to make improvements.

The neighborhood association's board will meet on Wednesday, August 18 to discuss the survey results and plan for the coming general meeting, and a general neighborhood meeting will be held on Thursday, August 19, at 7:00pm at St. Paul's church at Bond and Green streets to brainstorm on the ideas resulting from the survey as well as other ideas presented by interested neighbors in order to identify possible next steps. A committee will be formed to look into these possible paths forward and to start work towards an eventual consensus master plan for neighborhood improvements to be voted on in the future by the whole neighborhood, so we can then best work with the city and state as well as pursue grants or other funding to progress towards the goals the neighborhood identifies.



Westminster Municipal Band performs at last year's summer concert August 23, 2009 in Belle Grove Square Park.



Neighbors chat with Westminster Municipal Band during Night Out for Crime Prevention, Tuesday, August 10, 2010.

Key Results

In the paragraphs that follow, we'll highlight what the surveys have found so far (it's still not too late to turn in your survey!). Not every respondent answered every question, so for some of them, more data is available. We'll summarize and generalize where possible to give a feel for what most respondents said, and address here those questions where there was a significant consensus. We'll also include in this newsletter a collection comments we received from survey respondents leading up to the coming discussion of possible next steps.

Survey respondents:

About 4 out of 5 surveys received so far were turned in by homeowners. The time residents have lived in Belle Grove Square ranges from 1 to 53 years, with an average time of 15 years in the neighborhood.

All of the survey respondents indicated they did feel like they were part of the neighborhood. About 63% described the overall state of maintenance in the neighborhood as well kept, while the rest described it as mediocre



Mayor Kevin Utz at National Night Out August 3rd in the park.



McGruff the Crime Dog consults with local residents on crime prevention during National Night Out, Tuesday, August 3, 2010.

(none described the neighborhood as run down, the third category).

City services:

We asked residents to rate a series of concerns for the neighborhood on a scale of not concerned, somewhat concerned or very concerned.

The highest ratings of at least 60% "very concerned" were received for the categories of crime, speeding, vandalism, unkempt rentals, and historic preservation (which received the highest percentage of very concerned, at about four out of five), with about half of residents very concerned about traffic and unkempt property. Majorities also indicated they were "somewhat concerned" about the general appearance of the area, power lines, roads and street lighting.

Similarly, we asked residents to rate six major city services on a scale of good, fair, or poor. Half of neighborhood residents rated police protection fair, with the balance split between good and poor. Three quarters or more rated fire protection, trash collecting and park maintenance good, while about 90% rated street repair fair with the rest rating it poor. Public transportation also received almost

all ratings of fair or poor.

About 78% of respondents had either participated in the city program providing tax credits for renovations to properties in the historic district or were interested in more information on how to do so.

Next steps:

All survey respondents thought it was a good idea to bury overhead power lines. A number of write-in comments supported the idea in general but suggested possible alternatives that might be more budget friendly as it is understood



A City of Westminster crew works to clear downed tree limbs from Park Avenue after a weekend July wind-storm.

this may be the most expensive goal to achieve.

About nine out of ten were in favor of upgrading lighting around the square as well as in the park. All of the respondents supported the idea of upgrading park benches and trash cans in the park, as well as improving sidewalks along Bond Street.

Few respondents supported enlarging the neighborhood's service area to include Liberty or Green streets.

About four out of five respondents were in favor of the eventual adoption of historic preservation like Uniontown. Because many write-in comments concerned historic preservation and it's a topic that's frequently misunderstood, we're planning to have articles in the newsletter in the next issues providing some answers to common questions about the topic and more information about it.

On the next page, we've reprinted some of the excellent comments we received with this year's surveys.

Be sure to make plans to attend the neighborhood general meeting on August 19! We'd love to hear your ideas for how best to move the neighborhood forward, and look forward to seeing you there!

Survey Comments

The neighborhood received a lot of great write-in comments with this year's neighborhood surveys. A selection of the write-in notes are reprinted below (in no specific order):

"We think the neighborhood is holding its own."

re: bury power lines, "Budget will not permit."

"We like the defining lines of Belle Grove Square as originally laid out."

"The picnics, yard sales, open houses are creating neighborhood cohesion and pride. Also the new signs will be a neat addition."

"I would like for any improvements to be geared toward an older look than a more modern one. The fountain needs to be on more and we could use more perennial beds in the park."

"Thanks for [our] neighbors for their concerns of improving the park, street signs and organization of social events – much appreciated!"

re: needed services, "Bus line."

"Keep the park neighborhood [around] the park."

"It's getting better – a few problem renters are gone, events we've had makes us feel more like a cohesive, welcoming neighborhood."

"Foot traffic through our area with drug activity."

"Improvements should be considered with discussions of cost, long term results, etc. And I think these discussions are already happening very prudently – I think we have a good group."

re: West Green, "I think these folks are already pretty cohesive on their own."

re: Liberty, "Liberty is a very different neighborhood with very unique issues – they need their own group."

re: historic preservation, "I think [Uniontown is] beautiful but some of their rules were taken too far. I'd love the look without going nuts."

"We feel church organizations [that rent the park] should keep sound systems down on Sundays! Should only be allowed acoustic instruments. Not all enjoy loud music on our day off."

"Neighborhood is getting better, neighbors working on their homes, painting, etc."

"Would hate to lose the brick walks on Bond Street if upgraded."

"I would like more information about historic preservation."

"Residents are friendly and caring but 'visitors' are often a cause of concern – 'visitors' are still a problem and seem to be a source of vandalism and crime but more residents now know one another and are more likely to communicate with each other."

"It was great when the city provided the roll off of mulch!"

"We should repair and repaint the benches but replace the trash cans."

"Although I do not think it would be advantageous to include Liberty and Green streets in 'our' neighborhood I would like to work with them and help them to organize their own organizations."

"It's fairly friendly with some sketchy transient people walking through on a regular basis."

"I would like to see more police presence and faster response time to complaints, and better attitude from officers!"

"Great job on organizing neighborhood and working towards improvements. We really appreciate the hard work and enjoyed the picnic, yard sale, etc. Thanks!"

"It's great to see the neighborhood association working with the city."

"The city does a great job with the park and fountain."

"I think our neighborhood is moving in a positive direction."

"I am interested in preserving our neighborhood for future generations."

"The neighborhood is increasingly close and caring."

re: maintenance, "There is a significant difference between owner occupied homes and most rentals."

re: better or worse, "More evident care, are actively improving homes, and are working together to call the city's attention to problems."

re: crime, "There is [apparent or real] drug traffic in the area."

re: street repair, "Bond St. is very poor."

"Should we work with another neighborhood to establish a neighborhood watch? Should we work with owners of rental units to try to ensure that property is protected and renters are not drug sellers?"

"One alternative concerning power lines is to reposition the poles to the alleys."

"We need more police patrols after 10:00pm."

"We have friendly owners, but increasing criminal element."

"There is increasing drug traffic, open drinking of alcohol in the park."

"The police are unresponsive to their own crime reports."

"We need daily evening police patrols, oversight of landlords and their property and enforcement of the 'drug site' eviction policy."

"Expansion of the neighborhood is premature, since we have many issues to work on in our own small geographic area. The city should be actively encouraging [Green and Liberty streets] to organize themselves now."

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Residents start to gather for the July 15th neighborhood picnic.