

Planting seeds of renewal in struggling Lowell neighborhood

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LOWELL -- The billowing red and green of the Portuguese flag. Lattices wrapped in thick grapevines plump with fruit waiting to become wine. The warm aroma of sweet bread. Fresh fish. Immaculately maintained homes. People who still dress in their Sunday best to attend Mass.

"This neighborhood is only hanging on because of the elderly Portuguese," said David Koch, president of the Back Central Neighborhood Association. "Their kids have, for the most part, left for the suburbs."

Koch still lives in the Mill Street home his parents purchased in 1950, which, until the Civil War, was a barn housing cows at the Fletcher family's farm, when that section of Lowell was part of Chelmsford. There they raised 13 children. Koch and his wife



David Koch, president of the Back Central Neighborhood Association in Lowell, has a vision that starts with the apple tree thriving in front of his Mill Street home. SUN / JENNIFER MYERS

Dina are raising eight.

In his youth, everyone in the neighborhood knew each other, there were no fences and 200 kids living between Mill, Richmond and Ames streets.

"On Halloween night we watched hundred of kids migrating to Belvidere to go trick-or-treating," Koch said. "The sense of community is missing. We are becoming a transient neighborhood."

The problems facing Back Central are similar to those encountered in the city's other densely populated neighborhoods: overdevelopment, a lack of parking, dwindling green space and absentee landlords.



Residents and officials want to bring new life to the Back Central neighborhood places like Hosford Square. SUN / JENNIFER MYERS

"We need a way to hold these property owners accountable so they maintain their buildings," said Koch. "They do not care about the neighborhood, just their check from the

state. Their tenants trash the place, leaving trash out on the sidewalk all week long."

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Seventeen graduate students from MIT's Department of Urban Studies and Planning want to help. They have been in the neighborhood collecting data and observing what works and what does not.

Two weeks ago, they held a preliminary meeting with residents to collect ideas and feedback. A completed neighborhood-improvement plan is expected to be ready for a meeting on Dec. 3.

The Back Central

plan marks the third time that MIT professor Terry Szold has brought a group of



This riverfront land on Lawrence Street is slated for townhouses, but neighbors would rather see a park along the Concord River, which they say could revitalize the neighborhood. SUN / JENNIFER MYERS

graduate students to the Mill City. In 2005, they completed a master plan for Centralville. In 2007 they returned to take on the Acre.

"I love the city," said Szold. "The diversity of places within the city is very intriguing for planning students, as are the challenges of maintaining the history and working, older neighborhoods that are subject to new pressures."

According to Lowell Chief Planner George Proakis, an MIT alumnus, the cost of putting together a comparable plan through the use of hired consultants could cost the city upwards of \$100,000.

"The benefit of having a plan on file is that when funding, either through grants or from the



Residents hope to see a new use for the vacant Butler School in the Sacred Heart neighborhood. SUN / JENNIFER MYERS

city, does become available we have a prioritized blueprint to work off of," Proakis said. "It lays the groundwork for what can be done and provides guidance in quality of development."

In Back Central, the students are targeting intersection improvements, beautification ideas, ways to alleviate the parking crunch and potential uses for vacant properties both in the neighborhood and the adjacent Sacred Heart neighborhood.

What was once a hydroelectric plant and later a manufacturing facility at Lawrence and Mill streets is slated to become housing units. The neighbors would rather see a riverfront park. The MIT group is studying the best use for the parcel.

"We cannot keep penning the neighborhood up with housing," Koch said. "We need open space that will bring people in."

The five-way intersection of Rogers and Lawrence streets is bleak. Covered in drab, gray pavement, anchored by a bar, liquor store and laundromat.

Preliminary MIT plans call for widening the streets, improving the look of the storefronts and adding more green space, as well as making the traffic pattern less complicated by making what is now a five-way intersection a more traditional four-way intersection.

The MIT students were particularly impressed by the apple trees Koch has planted in front of his house, an idea they think can beautify the entire enclave.

Koch has bigger plans.

The Imperial apple tree he planted 23 years ago when his son David was born produces as many as 1,000 apples annually. He sees it as a catalyst to reinvigorate the entire city.

"We have 14,000 streets in the city. That means there are 28,000 sidewalks where fruit trees can be planted," he said.

Koch's vision is to start a pilot program in the Back Central neighborhood where kids would be paid to plant and prune the trees, as well as harvest the fruit. The fruit would then be sold at a neighborhood farmers' market. City residents who purchase the produce would be credited a certain amount of money on their tax bills for each dollar they spend. He said he has also spoken to a vice president from Veryfine who said the Littleton juice company would buy any surplus fruit.

"The rest of the money goes in the city's coffers," Koch said. "We need to motivate these children that are walking around with nothing to do in their eyes, give them some pride in the value of their work while generating revenue for the city, making the city beautiful and reducing crime."

In the adjacent Sacred Heart neighborhood, the biggest question mark surrounds the future of three large vacant buildings: the Sacred Heart Church on Moore Street that closed its doors in 2004, the former Prince Spaghetti Factory that ceased operations more than a decade ago and the old Butler School, vacant and falling apart.

"Manufacturing is gone and it's not coming back," says Sacred Heart Neighborhood Association president Carol McCarthy, peering through the chain-link fence at block of concrete that once housed Prince. "It is a prime property for the right use."

She said the neighbors would love to see a Christmas Tree shop or Costco on the 14-acre site, but Proakis said it may be too far tucked away off of the main road for that type of development.

"Then, I would like to see some detached 55-plus housing units and maybe a restaurant and a little park for the residents," McCarthy said.

The parcel and building is owned by businessman Elkin McCallum. In August the City Council approved his request to designate the spot for the state's expedited permitting program, which streamlines the municipal-permitting process by guaranteeing permitting decisions within 180 days.

McCarthy said she thinks the city should close and sell the fire stations on Gorham and Lawrence streets and give the old Butler School a new life as a combined fire station.

The MIT group will meet again on Dec. 3 at 7 p.m. at the Rogers School on Highland Street. For more information, contact George Proakis at (978) 446-7200, ext. 1418, or by e-mail at gproakis@lowellma.gov.