

The Heritage Hill Association's 2011 Report to Neighbors

"The purpose of the Heritage Hill Association is to provide neighbors a way of collectively building a healthy, historically preserved community in which people can live and work in a secure and stable environment."

WHO WE ARE:

The **Heritage Hill Association** is the neighborhood organization of the Heritage Hill Historic District. Our boundaries are the northern rear property lines of Crescent Street to the southern rear property lines of Pleasant Street (including the 600 block of Union SE); the eastern property lines of Union Avenue to the western property lines of Lafayette Avenue; also included is a jog down State Street to Jefferson Avenue to Fulton Street. Everyone who lives within these boundaries is a member of the Heritage Hill Association. Non-residents can also be members by contributing annual membership dues.

From the 2010 census, there are **1,300 structures** in the neighborhood that house **3,467 households**. Of these households, 70% are tenants, 30% are owners. Our **population totals 4,103**. Of that total, 81% are Caucasian, 9% are African American, 4% are Hispanic or Latino, 2% are Asian, the remaining 4% is a mix of Native American, Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander and mixed races; 64% are our residents are low to moderate income. As of 2002, 66% of our structures are either owner occupied or neighbor owned; the remaining 34% are absentee-owned.

Heritage Hill is an urban neighborhood and the Association's programs assist and work with neighbors to **address urban problems** -- neighborhood safety, land use conflicts, increasing traffic and parking demands, institutional expansion/construction disruption, housing maintenance and preservation issues, promotion of neighborhood schools, access to limited services, and other issues inherent in a densely populated, core city neighborhood. Just as with old houses, a neighborhood is dependent on a good and ongoing maintenance program!

Active, engaged, and mobilized neighbors, working with all our neighborhood institutions, the City of Grand Rapids, and any and all community resources, are the best indicators that Heritage Hill is a vital place to live and work!

Our neighborhood and work was recognized by *This Old House* magazine as it named Heritage Hill named one of **2011 Best Neighborhoods in the United States**.

A LITTLE HISTORY:

In 1968, neighbors organized together to stop mortgage red lining and the urban renewal plans that would have demolished over 75% of Heritage Hill structures. The first goal of the Heritage Hill Association was to block the bulldozers. Neighbors worked

diligently to invoke national preservation legislation that put Heritage Hill on the National Register of Historic Places. This stopped the demolitions and set a precedent throughout the U.S. that is still cited today. In 1988, the Association was the first Grand Rapids neighborhood to establish its own Master Plan of Heritage Hill. Today this plan continues to be updated and guides the Association and the City regarding life in the neighborhood.

OUR SERVICES:

The Crime Prevention Program: This program is provided to increase neighborhood safety with services that activate neighbors in **Neighborhood Watch, Drug Watch, and Block Club Organizing**. Key components include free home security surveys, personal safety information, victim assistance, and producing and distributing crime information/alert/e-alert notices and fliers. Block Club organizing keeps neighbors work together to prioritize problems, identify resources, and develop and implement action plans to resolve problems. In 2011, this program was primarily funded by federal Community Development Block Grants that the **City of Grand Rapids** receives and then funds a myriad of community programs, one of which is the Heritage Hill Association's.

Neighborhood Improvement Program: This program addresses all the other quality of life issues that are not crime related. Its purpose is to generate resident involvement and leadership to preserve, protect, and maintain the residential nature of Heritage Hill; to resolve issues of concern; and build upon neighborhood strengths that improve the quality of life in the neighborhood. Issues commonly include land use conflicts, traffic/parking struggles, institutional expansion, promoting neighborhood schools, etc. Additional components consist of educating, referring and assisting residents with available City services and community resources and implementing and re-evaluating needs identified in the *Master Plan of Heritage Hill*. Like the crime prevention program, this program is partially funded by the federal **Community Development Block Grant** funds that the **City of Grand Rapids** awards to the Heritage Hill Association's program.

Apartment/Homes for Sale Listing Service: Due to our **large rental community**, the Association produces and publishes a weekly list of available apartments in Heritage Hill whose landlords choose to list with us. It is an extremely popular service and in 2011 the neighborhood is so occupied. Our list has dwindled from typically 5 to 6 pages to only 1 to 2 of available apartments. Apartments have been renting like hotcakes!

Our list is free and available at our office and also on our Web site (www.heritagehillweb.org). For landlords, the price to list an apartment is \$45 for a studio apartment; \$50 for a one-bedroom; \$55 for a two-bedroom and \$60 for 3 or more bedrooms. The listing is for 2 months or until the apartment is rented, whichever comes first. The list also includes **Homes for Sale** in Heritage Hill. **For Sale** listings run for two months, are purchased by the owner or the owner's agent, and cost \$100.

Additional services that we offer landlords and tenants include assistance with their rights and responsibilities.

The Heritage Herald: The Association produces and publishes a bi-monthly newsletter that is mailed to the 4,800 addresses in Heritage Hill. It publicizes events, issues, and other information of interest to neighbors. This is done to promote neighborhood identity and foster community. Occasional **e-newsletters** and updates keep people informed in between the HHA's printed newsletters. Please forward your email address to us heritage@heritagehillweb.org to be added to this distribution list.

The Heritage Hill Web Site: The Association maintains and updates a website that hosts a variety of information regarding our neighborhood. The weekly apartment listing is available here along with the **guidelines of the City's Historic Preservation Commission** as well as the application for any exterior work. There is also information and links to the State and Federal historic tax credits. In 2011 we upgraded the server to our website that unfortunately cannot read the database that allows users to retrieve individual photos and information on every house in Heritage Hill "*Heritage Hill at your fingertips*". Quotes are in to upgrade this database and HHA is currently seeking funding for this re-program. The Association's **Facebook** is also easily accessed from the home page of the website.

The Annual Tour of Homes: This is the **largest fund-raiser and promotional effort** of the Heritage Hill Association. The funds are needed to sustain our Crime Prevention and Neighborhood Improvement programs. It also promotes our architectural heritage and our neighborhood as a great place to live and work! **The Home Tour has moved back to its initial spring roots in 2011.** The fabulous ArtPrize was too tough to compete with so we've moved out of its way! The date for 2012 is May 19 and 20th.

The Annual Heritage Hill Garden Tour: The fourth garden tour was a great success due to the leadership of the North College Block Club (NCBC). HHA arranged the transfer and split the proceeds with NCBC in 2011. We are hoping to find new leaders for the 2012 Garden Tour that will be held in mid to late summer. *Calling all you southern Heritage Hill gardeners!*

Social Events: The Association hosts two annual neighborhood wide events to bring all neighbors together to celebrate around our community table. The **Neighborhood-Wide Night Out Picnic** is in August; the **Holiday Potluck and Annual Meeting** is the Friday after the Thanksgiving weekend. The Association also invites neighbors to hold an annual neighborhood-wide **Yard Sales Day** that is now planned for early fall.

Architectural and Historical Survey Files: The HHA office maintains the architectural survey files of each house in the neighborhood that were compiled in 1969. This survey was necessary to place Heritage Hill on the **National Register of Historic Places** that effectively saved over 75% of the neighborhood from demolition. Most of the information from these files was and will be again be posted on our website once an updated program is complete.

Etc., etc., etc... The **Heritage Hill Association office** is often the first place neighbors call numerous questions regarding ... most anything. Common questions include historic preservation, landlord/tenant rights and responsibilities, contractor referrals, neighborhood issues, who lives at ... who to call for this ... how can I handle this problem ... what is that house zoned for ... when is garbage day ... where do I vote ...etc., etc, etc.

THE ASSOCIATION AND NEIGHBORS' ACCOMPLISHMENTS IN 2011:

Land Use Issues:

- **Pleasant Park:** Everything is in the works for this great new and much needed green space for the Heritage Hill and South Hill communities. Currently in the grant and fundraising mode, construction is hoped to begin late 2012 or more likely 2013.
- The **University Preparatory Academy (UPrep)** moved from the Vandenberg School and into the former City High building at 111 College NE in 2010. Numerous meetings took place in early 2011 to readdress planned additions to the building. Consensus was achieved with the school and Heritage Hill neighbors and all plans were approved. Unfortunately UPrep's plans have changed and will likely be moving from this location. It is hoped that the Montessori program will move back into this building.
- Welcomed the **Child Discovery Centers** in its move to the **Vandenberg School**. School bells began ringing again in the fall of 2011 with a great K-5 school of choice.
- Organized several neighbors meetings with the developers of the former **Bethlehem Lutheran Church**. Neighbors opposed the request for installing 22 apartments due to increased parking pressures. Neighbors wanted a less dense use in the range of 16 units. The Grand Rapids Zoning Appeals Board did not agree and supported the higher use.
- Two requests for expanding the use of **Bed and Breakfast** and opening such establishments to hosting larger events was a big topic in 2011. Considerations were debated for the current B&B at Logan and Morris SE and also for a new proposal for an inn and event facility for 44 Lafayette NE. Both applications were opposed by the Heritage Hill Association and a majority of near neighbors due to the disruption to the character of a residential neighborhood. Both proposals were more suited for a commercial venue in a commercial zone. The Grand Rapids Zoning Appeals Board agreed and both were denied. The B&B at Logan was allowed to increase its number of sleeping rooms to 8.
- Reviewed monthly **Grand Rapids Zoning and Planning Department** agendas for issues affecting the neighborhood.
- Maintained **communication network** with each of our neighboring hospitals, colleges and universities, institutions, and neighborhood associations.
- Continued to hold neighbors meetings with **Saint Mary's Hospital** representatives to address mutual issues on a semi-annual frequency. The redevelopment of Saint Luke's (corner of Lafayette and Cherry) is in progress.
- Began visioning sessions for development of a site specific plan for **State Street**. The stakeholder planning process will be finalized in 2012

- Participating with the City of Grand Rapids and numerous stakeholders on the **Michigan Street Corridor** from the river to the Beltline. This work is a 2-year planning process.
- Had several meetings with **ICCF** regarding its progress on the **Wealthy Jefferson Neighborhood Initiative**. Applauded the ground-breaking and construction of mixed-used commercial buildings along Wealthy Street at LaGrave. Organized a neighbors meeting to review guiding principles for a mixed development at the corner of Prospect, Wealthy and Division (the former Little Jack's et all properties). Funding has yet to be found for this project and no final plans have been presented to neighbors.
- Assisted 10 residents with necessary documentation for the State's **Historic Tax Credits** program.

Crime Prevention and Community Organizing:

- **Communication:** In 2010, we continued our communication network that includes Crime Alert fliers, the Heritage Herald, E-Alerts, and word of mouth - all ways to keep our neighborhood safe, stable, and a pleasant place to live and work. Neighbors are urged to watch out for each other, to report crimes when they occur and to call the police on suspicious activity while it is "in progress". Neighbors call the police and they also call the Heritage Hill Association at 459-8950 and get the entire neighborhood involved.
- **Burglary:** Our communication network helped put down a burglary problem that cropped up this fall. Neighbors called the police and the Association about break-ins at their homes or on their blocks. Detailed flyers were sent out in E-Alerts and door-to-door to hundreds of other neighbors with tips to prevent burglaries. Although the total home burglaries were only 10 in the eight weeks of September - November 30, (out of 4000 households), police officers made an arrest in late November and only two incidents occurred in the next two months! Patrol officers like to get calls about a crime-in-progress. It is an opportunity to make an arrest that could stop to a crime wave. Don't ever think your calls to the police are a bother. They are vital.
- **Graffiti:** During 2010 graffiti nearly disappeared from the State Street corridor due to our focus on getting it removed quickly. Owners were contacted and requested to get it cleaned or painted right away. The city has a **graffiti hotline** you can call when you see the markings on utility boxes in your area of the Hill (456-3666). Or call the Association office (459-8950) with the exact location, what surface is the graffiti on, and the color of the surface. The markings we see are done by high school and college students, not gangs.
- **Broken Windows:** There is a theory that broken windows encourage more broken windows. It is a signal that no one cares about the building or the area. When several windows were broken at a vacant building on State Street this summer we urged the owner to replace them instead of boarding them. The breakage stopped.
- **Home and Apartment Security:** This year we performed free home security surveys to six households and showed owners and tenants ways an intruder could get inside quickly and quietly. While checking a dwelling where a burglar kicked in a door, we found a window next to the door was unlocked as were most of the other

windows on the first floor. Other surveys found deadbolts that are too short, windows with broken or weak locks and no window stops, basement windows that would allow a quick entry; or faucets, ledges and flat roofs that can be used to get to unlocked windows. We give advice of how to make doors secure against force. Owners of rentals are provided a copy of the survey and the recommended changes on the request of the tenant. Call Barb at 459-8950 if you want a safety check of your apartment or home. They are free and part of our **Neighborhood Watch**.

- **Hot Spots:** A “hot spot” is the site that has a great many calls for police service. Heritage Hill neighbors and businesses targeted one business area as a hot spot due to repeated problems.
The **300 blocks of State Street** residential addresses celebrates a 66% decrease in crime problems since 2008. *In 2008 police responded 201 times; in 2009 they came out 169 times and in 2010 the police visits were down to 89.* What happened? We organized a series of meetings over the last five years where panhandling, graffiti and public drinking were targeted as core problems by business owners, residents and the police.
- **Foster Park was the site of major improvement.** In 2010 there were only seven incidents requiring police service to the park down from two dozen each in 2008 and 25 in 2009.
- **Problems at Clarks Food Center** dropped over 40% from 87 incidents in 2008 to 39 last year.
- **State Street merchants** filed a petition with the **City of Grand Rapids Parking Commission** to remove the parking meters on the 300 blocks of State Street.
- **What’s next on State Street?** The Association is working to organize a State Street Strategic Planning Process for neighbors, businesses and owners to develop a long range plan that will guide future development, identify possible resources and encourage further investment on the State Street corridor.
- **Residential Hot Spots** have also benefitted from our networking with the Grand Rapids Police Department, block clubs and individuals. Several owners received letters this year alerting them to police responses for problems at their buildings. They often do not realize there is a problem and are sometimes grateful for the notice. In three instances the owners cooperated and the problems were resolved. One involved a disturbance problem, another, altercations and disturbances and the third a variety of problems including housing code violations.
- **Urban Litter:** Our campaign to reduce the urban litter and damage to painted light poles has been somewhat successful. In several issues of the Herald photos of posters glued or taped to the black utility poles were highlighted. Since then an unidentified poster stripper seems to be keeping poles clean on Wealthy Street in the Hill. Local nightclubs and groups are urged to promote with signs in businesses, yards signs, college bill boards, blogs, Face Book, websites and twitter. Yard Sales signs can be placed on wires and removed after the event or sales are over.
- **Everyday nuisances and everyday solutions:** We get calls about the frustrations of loud music, loud voices and laughing at 3:00 a. m., fast food litter thrown from cars, garbage in yards, in garages and on porches, tall grass, dead trees, fallen limbs and piles of brush; peeling paint, broken windows and vacant houses; pot holes, and icy sidewalks, cars blocking sidewalks and driveways, parking in yards and in shared

driveways; street lights out, leaves in gutters, recycle bins stored on streets and porches; barking dogs inside and out. We have some of the same problems and know how it is when it seems there is no apparent answer. *We* are not the solution but dozens of times each year we work with neighbors to resolve the everyday nuisance that is driving them crazy.

- **Clean ups:** The Association worked with **City Parks** staff and neighbors to keep **Foster Park** at State and Madison a lovely little green space in the heart of the Hill. In 2010 a group of neighbors got together one night and tore a mountain of weeds from the flower beds at the park. Then **Job Corp** students came and planted 50 donated tulip bulbs in the park. We can't wait to see them this spring! And finally we were glad to work with the energetic **Calvin College** first year students who dug up all the overgrown day lilies under the trees on State Street and saved the trees from choking to death. In 2010 we were also grateful for the help of the Social Security Administration's Inspector General and staff over on College SE who helped senior citizens on the 400 block of Union SE with lawn clean ups.
- **Tenant Assistance:** We've met with many students and their parents who are seeking nice, safe and moderately priced rental housing in Heritage Hill. We offered our Rental Listings, a Tenant/owner Rights and Responsibilities booklet and a Personal Safety Guide to get them started.
- **Tenant Organizing:** In 2010 we met with the **Tenant Right's Collaborative**, a city-wide organizing and educational effort to enhance rental practices, improve housing conditions and training on tenant rights and responsibilities. Coming up in 2011 are three tenants focus groups that will identify major issues of concern for tenants in Grand Rapids.

Parking/Traffic/Street Construction:

- **Parking and traffic concerns** continue to be issues for neighbors, primarily in the north end but also pockets of concern in the mid and south end of Heritage Hill. We continue to respond to issues as best we can with limited tools to effect change.
- Monitored/assisted with concerns regarding the neighborhood sewer replacement projects. The south end of Heritage Hill was under construction for most of 2011.

Neighborhood Promotion:

- Organized and orchestrated the annual **Home Tour**; showcased 9 open houses and recruited **234 volunteers** to staff the homes.
- With the leadership of the North College Block Club, presented the 4th annual **Garden Tour**.
- Compiled and published 6 issues of the **Heritage Herald** and distributed to **4,800 neighbors** and posted at our website.
- Compiled, produced and provided weekly **apartment listings** at the HHA office and website. Advertised the Association's rental listing service and available apartments in GVSU's student newspaper and Craig's List.
- Organized the annual **Heritage Hill Neighborhood-Wide Yard Sales Day** in August 2011.

Fundraising:

- Presented the first **Friday Night Fundraising Soiree**, a wine, beer, food pairing and silent art auction.
- Began a **Fund Development** campaign to orchestrate neighborhood donations and sponsorships. This will be a focus in 2012 as numerous funding sources have been in decline due to the economic slowdown over the last several years. To continue providing services to Heritage Hill in the current arrangement, additional revenues must be found.

Plus: Handled 1000's of calls and requests regarding a multitude of quality of life issues in Heritage Hill

And we continue working with you in 2012 ... We welcome all new neighbors in 2011 and encourage you to get active in your neighborhood. We have a place for you!