Walnut Hills: Northwest Quadrant Redevelopment

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Goals

Economically, Walnut Hills is not in the best position. The neighborhood as a whole has been experiencing disinvestment largely since the second half of the 20th century, and the Northwest Quadrant is no exception to this phenomenon. As residents moved out of the neighborhood, the businesses went with them, which have resulted in a neighborhood with high vacancies, criminal activity, and low neighborhood reinvestment. Despite the relatively low amount of commercial activity in the Northwest Quadrant, these characteristics of Walnut Hills are reflected in the district. At this point, there is almost no commercial activity in the district, with the exceptions being a junkyard at the corner of Gilbert Avenue and Walter Avenue, and what seems to be a construction/demolition company on Syracuse Street, near the interstate. The plan currently calls for the addition of roughly 605,000 square feet of commercial, office, and mixed-use structures, which could be a variety of uses and types, including (but not limited to): grocery stores, medium box retail outlets (target, best buy, etc), local or chain restaurants, professional offices (lawyers, doctors, architects, etc), and neighborhood services (Laundromats, fedex/kinkos, etc). Particular care should be taken to maximize the uses in the district by not offering businesses/services that are redundant and competitive with other similar sized developments in the area. For example: a P.F. Changs would not be an appropriate business in the district due to proximity of another P.F. Changs just north on I71 in
Rookwood Commons. However, businesses like Trader Joes or Whole Foods would be ideal, because they would not be competing with anything else in the area, and would be unique to the district, which would draw new customers to Walnut Hills in general. Market forces would likely create the demand for such businesses and intervention would likely not be necessary. Additionally, professional offices/services would be in a unique position due to the geographic location of the site relative to surrounding nodes (proximity between Hyde Park and the hospitals of uptown, for example). But would this development further push Walnut Hills’ neighborhood business district to extinction?

This development would bring much needed cash flow to Walnut Hills in general, which could further enable the Walnut Hills Redevelopment Foundation and their respective plans and projects. Perhaps the NBD of Walnut Hills could be transformed to a supporting node to the Northwest Quadrant by providing goods and services that the project would lack (like bars, clubs, music venues, art studios, etc). Since the Northwest Quadrant would be essentially leveled, those residents that lived there prior to the redevelopment would have to move. This is a unique opportunity to address Walnut Hills’ vacancy problems by moving those people back in to the neighborhood. Poverty would no longer be concentrated in the Northwest Quadrant, and residents would be able to disperse throughout Walnut Hills, in essence de-concentrating poverty. This could be an opportunity to improve the existing housing stock within Walnut Hills, to cope with the influx of residents that used to live in the Northwest Quadrant. The plan also calls for the addition and redesign of greenspace. The existing greenspace is unmaintained and serves little more purpose than that of a buffer zone between the neighborhood’s residents and the highway. In the new plan, two major public greenspaces will be added,
serving as anchors for each node of development. Within the residential zone, the greenspace will serve as an anchor for the community and provide a public space for people to interact, as well as a traffic calming device by circulating traffic around the central greenspace and through the neighborhood itself. Within the commercial zone, the central parkspace will provide an area for outdoor dining, public performance, and as a socialization space in addition to serving as an anchor for commercial activity. The existing greenspace that borders interstate 71 will be better maintained, as well as redesigned to serve other purposes than simply just a buffer. The inclusion of a trail along this particular greenspace will make it more functional as a park rather than just a tangled mess of shrubs and trees. The natural features of the site will be taken in to the design of all of the spaces within the site. Care will be taken not to disturb the existing topographic conditions that are unique to the site and permeable surfaces will be used where possible to lessen the strain on the sewer system.

Project Description

The portion of Walnut Hills colloquially known as “The Northwest Quadrant” by residents resides in the top left corner of Walnut Hills, bounded by Gilbert Avenue on the east, Interstate 71 to the west, Victory Parkway to the north and Martin Luther King Boulevard to the south. It is a district in and of itself and it is largely disconnected from the rest of Walnut Hills, mostly due to the site’s lack of transportation infrastructure, as well as its unique topographic features. These factors, combined with the district’s high renter occupancy, and high concentration of impoverished residents results in a district that is a hotbed of criminal activity, as well as ideal conditions for neighborhood
disinvestment. The desired result of the redevelopment of this district is to transform the Northwest Quadrant from a disconnected and impoverished district that none of the other residents of Walnut Hills travel to, to a district that is part of Walnut Hills, and a place that people (from everywhere) want to visit, and perhaps live in.

**Rationale**

The site is bounded by Gilbert Avenue, Martin Luther King Drive, Victory Parkway, and Interstate 71 (as illustrated in the diagram below).

Currently, there are only three roads that access the site, and many dead end streets and cul-de-sacs, which creates an ideal location for criminal activity. Additionally, many of the paved surfaces are in varying states of disrepair and are in need of replacement or repair. In addition to the physical improvements needed at the site, the larger issue that
plagues Walnut Hills is that of vacancies. Like the rest of the neighborhood, the Northwest Quadrant has a high amount of vacant properties and many structures in the neighborhood are in varying states of disrepair (both occupied and unoccupied units). The current plan for the site responds to these challenges by introducing an entirely new street grid, new residential and commercial structures, and essentially starting with a clean slate.

Over the course of the study period, several meetings with community stakeholders occurred. During these meetings, it was discussed what they wanted to see in Walnut Hills, what needed improvement, what they liked, what they felt were the most pressing issues, etc. Most of the issues the community stakeholders brought up had little relevancy to the plans for the Northwest Quadrant. Their concerns were mostly related to the NBD, changing E. McMillan back into a two-way street, and what was going to happen to the Krogers grocery store, but the Northwest Quadrant was mentioned, and they had some input related to the site. The community stakeholders expressed concern that the district is a hotbed of crime, that it is disconnected from Walnut Hills, that it does not serve its purpose as a neighborhood by providing the services typically demanded of residential districts (safe clean housing, low crime, neighborhood commercial services, etc), but the most important input the community stakeholders expressed was that something needed to be done with the district. The plan responds to these requests in several ways, the first of which being connectivity. Since there was emphasis placed on restoring a cohesive street grid in the district, that was the first and foremost design concern. The plan calls for a completely redesigned street grid, only leaving Blair Avenue undisturbed. Second, the plan calls for a complete replacement of housing structures, and new commercial
buildings added. This solves two problems; first the decaying housing will be replaced with new buildings that match the rest of the character of the neighborhood. These housing units will be 1/3 affordable over market rate to retain low-income residents as well as to prevent socioeconomic homogenization. Additionally, the new commercial district of the Northwest Quadrant will make the district a destination for many residents within the city. It will be an attractive shopping and entertainment district that will bolster more investment within Walnut Hills, as well as providing more essential neighborhood services for the residents of the new district.

The new highway plans are a substantial asset in relation to the site, and are the foundation for the current plan for the district. Without the new on/off ramps at Martin Luther King Drive, the plans for the Northwest Quadrant would have little clout and would likely fall apart. With the addition of new ramps for 71 north and south, this puts the site in a unique position to capitalize off of not only people traveling east and west through the city, but also people traveling north and south, to and from work, etc. This access to a large population of people, as well as easy access to the site puts the plan for the Northwest Quadrant in an excellent position.

In addition to the highway plans, the plan for the district also is in a position to capitalize off of the streetcar. The Northwest Quadrant is directly on the proposed streetcar line along Martin Luther King Dr. This, just like the highway plans makes the site a very attractive piece of property to would-be developers looking to capitalize off of transit oriented development.
**Implementation**

Much of the current plans for the district depend (almost entirely) on the hope that the site will be attractive enough for major developers to buy up the properties and begin redevelopment. The role that private developers would play in the redevelopment of the Northwest Quadrant is undeniable and the plan would likely not be possible without private investment. However, there are many grants and other financial incentives and opportunities at the federal and state level that this project could benefit from. The Northwest Quadrant redevelopment could benefit from both state and federal community development block grants as well as Neighborhood Stabilization Program grants on the state level.

**Precedent Studies**

During the design phase of the project, many examples were analyzed in relation to the site, and three developments were primarily examined for their relevancy to the project. The first of the case studies that were analyzed was Easton Town Center, which is located in Columbus, Ohio. Easton Town Center is a development in Columbus Ohio that is of a similar scale relative to the Northwest Quadrant. Easton is 1.5 million square foot commercial development created by Steiner and Associates that follows the walkable “town center” model of shopping center. Designed by Steiner and Associates, Easton was used as a case study in this project because of its size, location, and attributes in relation to the site. It is a larger development than what is planned for the Northwest Quadrant but its relevancy is undeniable. Although a smaller size, the Northwest Quadrant will follow similar design principles as Easton, and will have a greater residential component than that of Easton. However, block sizes, urban design, character, landscaping and tenants
will be relatively similar than that of Easton. Another precedent that was observed was The Greene, in Dayton, Ohio. The Greene was also developed by Steiner and Associates, and follows the same principles as with Easton. The Greene is about the same size as the proposed redevelopment of the Northwest Quadrant. According to Steiner and Associates website, The Greene contains 790,000 square feet of retail space, 128,000 square feet of office space, and 205 residential units. It is marginally larger than the proposed development, but along the same scale in terms of building footprints, site size, and intended density. Over 500,000 people visit the Greene every month; it is a very popular place for many to shop, and be entertained.

Bibliography

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"Steiner + Associates: The Greene". Steiner + Associates. 03-18-2010