Identifying Neighborhood Quality - The Traditional Approach

Census information and other familiar data sources focus on identifying residential and neighborhood quality through such factors as housing age, presence or lack of basic systems (e.g. in-door plumbing), housing value in relationship to area or regional values, number of bedrooms in relationship to household size, etc. Historically, these characteristics have been used to measure housing condition, to serve as a gauge of comparative quality between neighborhoods and cities, and to describe overall community quality.

While such information may be very useful, it does not necessarily offer an accurate picture of neighborhood quality. In fact, such information may unfairly label a residential area, or City as a whole, as less than desirable pursuant to housing quality. A prime example is that of housing value. Is an area comprised of homes with a per unit average housing value of $50,000 less desirable or of less quality than an area consisting of homes having an average per unit value of $100,000? Many planning and housing studies would respond in the affirmative. Essentially, there is an underlying assumption that more is better.

Master Plan Survey Findings

Data collected and analyzed during the planning process revealed that the perception of neighborhood and overall City quality was very closely linked to external image factors rather than housing value, age, or the unknown internal characteristics of housing units. Site conditions such as the presence of junk, abandoned vehicles, yard debris, and the like were identified by participants in the planning process as most significant to defining poor neighborhood quality.

Neighborhood Condition Survey

To fully determine potential "areas of concern" pursuant to neighborhood quality based on external site conditions, a comprehensive field survey of all residential areas was undertaken. In completing the field exercise, two assumptions were made:

- The perception of poor neighborhood quality is strongly related to the presence of site conditions perceived as undesirable; and

- The value of homes within an area does not define neighborhood quality. A neighborhood comprised of homes with an average value of $35,000 has the same quality potential as neighborhoods with more expensive housing.

A number of important planning benefits may be achieved from a comprehensive neighborhood site survey. These include:

- Offers an objective (versus subjective) means of identifying potential problem areas.

- Useful in identifying areas with highest (potential) need for rehabilitation, code

enforcement, etc.

- Helps verify the occurrence (or non-occurrence) of blighted locations.
- Useful when identifying and/or supporting the conversion of neighborhoods to a different form of land use.
- Useful when measuring the relationship of occupancy status (owner or renter occupied) to site/neighborhood conditions.
- Establishes a "baseline" for subsequent investigations.
- Allows one to better analyze the impacts of compatible relationships between residential and non-residential areas.

Survey results were assembled and reported on a block-by-block basis. Residential blocks were classified based on the "level of occurrence" of various site factors. These included:

- Abandoned and/or junk vehicle visible in side or front yard.
- Debris (e.g. discarded lumber, auto parts, trash, etc.) visible in front, side, or rear yard. Debris did not include trash at curbside waiting to be collected, trash/garbage containers, children's toys, or materials/trash stored adjacent to a trash/garbage receptacle for potential pick up.
- Boarded-up home.
- Burned-out home.
- Dilapidated fence (required at least two cases per block to be counted as one occurrence.)
- Grass/weed growth in front yard greater than 12 inches (required at least two such cases per block to be counted as one occurrence).
- Porch and/or roof falling/caving in.
- Excessive peeling of paint on front face of home (excessive being more than one-half of wall area). Homes being scraped/sanded were not included.
- Junk/debris strewn about a vacant lot.
- Dilapidated garages/sheds visible from sidewalk/street.
- Church or other non-residential property located in the neighborhood exhibiting the above conditions.

Blocks were classified based on the level of occurrence (number of times) site conditions were observed. This information was mapped using the following rigid standards:

- *None*

  Block experienced no homes or vacant lots with evidence of one or more site factors.

- *Moderate*

  Block experienced not more than two homes or vacant lots exhibiting site

factors.

- *High*

  Block experienced three or more homes or vacant lots exhibiting site factors.

Areas Exhibiting High Levels of Site Factors

Three areas exhibit homes characterized by high levels of site factors (see Residential Site Condition map). These are:

Area A

The group of blocks broadly defined by Getty, Oak, Scott, and Apple.

Area B

The group of blocks broadly defined by Keating, Continental, Laketon, and Nims.

Area C

The group of blocks broadly defined by Southern, Seventh, Mason, Fourth, Strong, and Sixth.

Areas A, B and C represent enclaves in which six or more blocks exhibit high levels of site related problems. Unlike many residential areas within the City, it was noted that each of the above areas tends to be highly visible to residents and visitors.

Area A abuts the highly traveled streets of Apple Avenue and Getty Street. As such, the blocks defined by this area receive high rates of visible exposure to those traveling the local roadways.

Area B fronts on Laketon Avenue, lying just west of the Laketon/US-31 Interchange. As with Area A, this location receives significant exposure to those traveling by vehicle.

Area C is sandwiched between Nelson Junior High School to the west and the Muskegon Senior High School on the east. The proximity to these schools leads to significant exposure of the Area C blocks.

The areas broadly defined by Larch, Hoyt, Grand, and Sixth, and by Clay, Sixth, Monroe, and Eighth have the potential to enter a similar stage.

Areas Exhibiting Moderate Levels of Site Factors

Blocks of moderate occurrence tend to be concentrated in the central portion of the City, but do exist throughout. Areas identified as "moderate" in level of occurrence typically require minimal improvement to advance to the non-occurrence stage.

There are many blocks/areas within the City not experiencing any site factor. The rate of "no" or "moderate" levels of site occurrence far exceeds the rate of "high" levels. Based on the prevalence of site factors as an indicator of blight, a vast majority of the City does not experience this problem.

There does not appear to be definite correlations between level of occurrence

and zoning or land use. While many areas exhibiting the highest levels of occurrence are found either adjacent, or in close proximity to, non-residential development and non-residential zoning districts, many are not.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on this analysis, and other related evaluations, the following recommendations were developed:

- Systematic and targeted programs of code enforcement need to be developed and implemented.

  Most cities must deal with the issue of property maintenance code enforcement and Muskegon is no exception. Currently, the City has a program wherein rental properties are uniformly inspected to determine the need for site improvement. This program includes on-going inspection of housing units to determine maintenance needs of the structure (e.g. peeling paint, rotten wood, etc.) and surrounding property. Observed violations are officially noticed, with the home owner provided opportunity to make necessary improvements. Failure to do so may result in fines and penalties. The program appears to have met with general success and we recommend it be supplemented. Various specific approaches for doing so are described in the following recommendations.

- The City should participate with Neighborhood Associations to develop programs of site enhancement (cleanup) similar to those implemented by the City during the Summer of 1996 along Hoyt (north of Laketon) and Muskegon Avenue (flower plantings). The allocation of funds to various Neighborhood Associations should consider the success of these cleanup programs.

- Community Development Block Grant Targeting. This includes the targeting of funds to isolated blocks experiencing site condition problems. Left unchecked, such blocks may result in the spread of area problems.

  The Residential Site Condition Survey identified a number of locations in which the presence of a high occurrence of housing and site related problems were limited to a single block within a larger residential area (refer to the Residential Site Condition Map). We recommend these blocks be analyzed for the targeting of a portion of the City's Community Development Block Grant (Entitlement) funds for housing rehabilitation and site related improvements. Targeting of funds to specific locations is justified based on the potential positive impacts to a broader neighborhood area brought on by resolving isolated pockets of need.

- Determine the merits of maintaining a residential area. It may be desirable to do so. It may not. The area bounded by Laketon and Nims represents a former residential area more suitable for development to other uses, including linkage to nearby industrial development.

- Utilize "anchor" facilities (e.g. hospitals, churches, schools, certain businesses, etc.) to help coordinate/spearhead neighborhood improvement efforts.

- Upgrade the City Zoning Ordinance to include very strict buffer standards between residential and non-residential districts. Greater emphasis should be placed on compatibility relationships between differing land uses, and residential/ neighborhood integrity will be enhanced by such an approach.

- Complete the neighborhood site survey on an annual basis. We suggest the effort be completed by Planning Commission team members. That is, divide the Planning Commission membership into teams of two, allocate reasonable program areas, have each team complete a field review of site conditions, and submit to staff for recording and mapping.

- Initiate as a pilot project an "Ombudsman" position to serve as a liaison between residents/ Neighborhood Associations and City Hall.

- Site Infill. The City has aggressively tackled residential site infill in the Downtown Historic District. Over the past several years, six or seven homes have been relocated to the Downtown.

  Site infill can be a very important and logical component of increasing the City's housing supply and in the stabilization of neighborhoods. Unfortunately, infill programs can be costly and time consuming, with long-term success difficult to predict.

We recommend the City convene a panel of local real estate and building professionals to analyze the City's infill potential. This might be accomplished under the auspices of the Muskegon Board of Realtors, or through a group of professionals selected by City staff. Charge the panel with identifying an infill methodology and implementation process.

- With the participation of area lending institutions and housing agencies, conduct annual (Neighborhood Association) workshops educating residents on the availability of housing improvement dollars and methods for securing same.

  Although no single effort will ever completely rid the City of housing blight, a concerted effort on a number of fronts could yield significant improvements. Combined with efforts to address other livability issues in the City, the overall quality of life and its perception by residents and visitors would be significantly improved.