

VIII

The Effects of Public Policy

The development of the Vollintine/Evergreen neighborhood was influenced by public policy. Today the most threatening aspects of the neighborhood are also involved with public policy. Therefore, its importance requires examination.

Early in the 20th century public policy placed some of the city's most attractive assets either in the neighborhood or nearby. Overton Park, the city's oldest park, the parkway system, and Snowden School were major attractions in developing the neighborhood. The city began providing occasional services as early as 1900 when a city report listed the vapor street light at old Raleigh Road (Jackson) and Trezevant Avenue. City sewers were connected in 1908 on Snowden east of Belvedere.¹ It is to be presumed that this pattern continued in all subdivisions as they were developed and populated. The streets were laid out, paved, and extended throughout the neighborhood's growth. Today three of the city's twenty-one scenic drives are in this neighborhood.² Early public transportation was coaxed in by private concerns who sometimes made it a condition for their development.

The Jackson Boulevard Improvement Club worked to secure Vollentine School, built in 1930, and Vollentine Park on 3.59 acres behind the school, which was dedicated in a spectacular ceremony June 16, 1933.

Headed by fifty former service men, the American Legion drum and bugle corps, a parade of more than 1,000 persons will herald the dedication of the new Vollentine Playground, Vollintine and Evergreen, Friday night.³

At the formal opening "bombs were shot from the playground."⁴

However, before the depression era, the government was not an overriding factor in urban development. Thereafter, a new stage in America's urban history began. "The national government became a significant force in shaping the quality of life in the cities," wrote Charles N. Glaab, historian at the University of Wisconsin.⁵ After the impact of the Depression and the New Deal, national policy consistently attempted "to order the urban environment."⁶

Government policy affected the economics of Vollintine/Evergreen when the Department of Health moved to protect the citizens of Memphis from raw milk and insisted on pasteurization in 1936. This meant that many of the small, family operated dairies closed, and their land became available for development.⁷

The Health Department complained to the city about a garbage dump on Brown which was in existence as late as 1939. In response to this complaint the city explained why it was located there, and that it would close the dump at the expiration of its contract.

. . . at the time that this location was started some fourteen years ago (1925) there were no houses with the exception of a few small Negro houses and white houses within two miles of this location. In fact, this subdivision was not opened up.⁸

The super flood of 1937 further illustrated the need for federal planning and protection in the city. All of north Memphis was subject to flooding. Vollintine/Evergreen was vulnerable, because two creeks, Lick and Cypress, wend their way through the section. While they provided good sweet water to the early settlers, they could change into a formidable force at floodtime. They constitute a drainage area of about 4,000 acres.⁹

Commercial Appeal articles reported that "Cypress Creek backwaters extended a block east of Springdale and that the creek was backed up almost to Vollintine Avenue."¹⁰ West of VECA, backwater from Lick Creek stood in Jackson Avenue at Montgomery and Olympic Streets; however, street cars continued in service along Jackson on raised tracks through the crest stages of the Mississippi. The water also backed out storm drains on Tutwiler near Watkins. Madison Heights Bayou backwater came through the Faxon Avenue storm drain.¹¹ W. W. Wharton reported that the "37 flood" backed up into the yard of his neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. William Coates, at the corner of Stonewall and Brown.¹²

When the waters of the 1937 Superflood receded, the city began several projects to deal with this problem. Two W.P.A. projects were begun; one worked to improve Hein Park drainage, and another attempted to control malaria hazards in Cypress Creek from University to McLean and in Lick Creek. One hundred seventeen men were employed to enlarge and straighten out the Cypress Creek channel from McLean to University.¹³ Extensive drainage work to prevent malaria and relieve the overflow conditions on Lick Creek were part of the W.P.A. project. In the mid-thirties the wooden bridges over Lick Creek south of Jackson were replaced by concrete bridges.¹⁴

Almost simultaneously there had been a call from Mayor Watkins Overton to rebuild the pumping station at Bayou Gayoso and to determine what aid was needed for the northern section of the city where water backed up through the Wolf River, Cypress Creek, Lick Creek, and minor bayous. Two thousand homes in north Memphis were flooded, and 739 people were moved out by city trucks. The city urged the building of pumping stations to hold back floods, stating: "Cypress Creek and bayous drain in an area of 12,000 acres, six times larger than the area handled by the Gayoso Bayou."¹⁵

The newspaper confirmed that a reservoir was planned in the lowlands along Cypress Creek. It would run from Watkins to Springdale with the southern edge a short distance above Brown Street.¹⁶ Federal legislation was

passed to prevent a recurrence of such flooding. The Ohio Valley Emergency Flood Control bill became law in 1937. It provided for a nine million dollar sea wall around Memphis, a portion of which can still be seen along Chelsea. The Memphis project was one of the largest projects sponsored under this legislation.¹⁷ This flood control activity in the late 1930s had great impact on Memphis and the Mid-South. In 1938 the improvements to Lick Creek from McLean to Claybrook were completed to tie in with the section between Evergreen and Maury.

One of the city's many W.P.A. projects to improve surface drainage and prevent mosquito breeding, Lick Creek has been lined, shaped and paved with riprap. The W.P.A. project for improving and constructing culverts over Lick Creek from Claybrook to Jackson which joins the section is two-thirds complete.¹⁸

Historically, drainage along the banks of the Lick and Cypress Creeks has been a problem. The most recent example was the flooding that occurred at Cypress Junior High School. (See Chapter VI)

Following the depression and the flood of 1937 the pattern was set. The federal government increased its role in the country's urban life. In flood control it had productive accomplishments for Memphis.

No federal program was more important to home building than the creation of the FHA (Federal Housing Administration) in 1934. This new public policy triggered a building boom during the late 1930s and following World War II. This "extended the possibilities of home ownership to a wider group in society . . ." ¹⁹ Developers made quick use of this program. As noted earlier, the first FHA financed home in Memphis was built in the Vollintine/Evergreen area. Thereafter, many first-time home owners moved into the moderately priced homes in the neighborhood.

By the 1950s new subdivisions were opening up further east; the day of the automobile had arrived. New cars and cheap gas caused traffic to increase on city streets.

East/west arteries, such as North Parkway, were particularly affected. Much of the public policy in the 1950s and 1960s dealt with the problems of moving heavier traffic through central city neighborhoods. Today much that concerns the neighborhood involves the flow of traffic through these same streets.

In the 1950s the city sought to protect motorists from accidents involving the trees along the Parkways. When a motorcycle patrolman crashed into a tree at North Parkway and Avalon in 1952, the Commercial Appeal reported it as "the seventh traffic fatality involving the trees on the Parkway since 1938."²⁰ In 1952 Mayor Watkins Overton and City Engineer William B. Fowler presented a plan to remove the trees and to replace the sixty-one foot neutral strip with a twenty-eight foot strip thereby widening each roadway to three lanes. The city argued with convincing evidence. There had been sixty-eight cases of personal injury and seventy cases of property damage due to the trees.²¹

Many residents did not want to lose the trees, the bridle paths or the pastoral quality of life of the area. Elinor McCorkle gave this example.

I remember that Mr. McCadden would come by every Sunday morning riding his horse. He'd come, tie his horse up and visit with us. It (North Parkway) was sort of a country type, although it was a major artery in Memphis. He'd come in and have coffee with Grandfather, and we'd do out and talk to the horse.²²

Her grandfather, A. L. Pritchard, protested the mayor's plan as did many other residents. In spite of this, the mayor's plan was adopted. The trees were cut and North Parkway was widened to three lanes of traffic on each side. Thus began an issue which still causes serious tensions in the city, i.e. how to balance the desires and rights of neighborhood residents against the need to improve traffic flow. In 1955 the Bartholomew Report stated:

The original function of the parkway system as a pleasure drive has been

almost completely abandoned due to the changing traffic conditions necessitating the use of the parkways for mixed traffic including heavy trucks.²³

The street improvement to North Parkway from East Parkway to Stonewall began in 1955 and was completed in 1956 by L & M Construction Company at a cost of \$360,966.²⁴ In 1962 the City Commission voted to change the name of Concord and part of Jackson to North Parkway extending the Parkway designation to Front. Then in 1966 work began on the Watkins and North Parkway underpass in an effort to relieve the congestion at that intersection.²⁵

A public policy which has affected the neighborhood for the last twenty-five years has been the proposed building of the interstate through Overton Park. During the 1950s when expressways were being built with fervor, construction of this section through Overton Park was hardly questioned and was accepted as progressive and inevitable. Plans were drawn; property was secured and demolition was begun. VECA lost few structures but it stood to lose many if all interchanges were completed as planned. Fortunately, most homes in the pathway of the Avalon interchange went untouched and are available today as homes. However, there is no way to truly ascertain the damage and unsettling conditions this has created. It now appears that the interstate will never go through the park and that some alternate route is required. Federal funds for the interstate system end in 1983. If the city is going to take the Overton Park segment out of the plan and obtain the funds for some other public need, it must develop a plan which can be agreed upon by the majority of people. Otherwise the funding will be lost to Memphis.

This was the reason Mike Ritz, Director of the Office of Planning and Development, presented a tentative plan to the VECA meeting on July 23, 1979, at Lindsay Memorial Presbyterian Church. This plan met with hostility. On January 5, 1980, Ritz presented a revised recommendation

to connect the Interstate 40 legs by using East Parkway, Poplar, North Parkway and Watkins or Garland.²⁶ There would be

an overpass running over Cleveland to Garland or Watkins for eastbound traffic, which would go north to North Parkway, returning to the interstate via East Parkway. Westbound traffic on the expressway would exit on East Parkway, go south to Poplar, west to Cleveland and then north to re-enter the interstate."²⁷

Interstate 240 would be designated as the truck route. If this plan is well received Mayor Wyeth Chandler announced the city will ask a return of some of the land held by the state as interstate right-of-way.

We're going to propose that they give us back a portion of the park and sell the part between the park and some point coming west for single-family dwellings, leaving the rest for recreation areas.²⁸

Chandler reported that the city could request use of the \$200 million in federal funds earmarked for the Overton Park expressway. Approximately six homes would be affected under this plan, and there would be no physical changes to Poplar or North Parkway. Neighborhood meetings are being held to analyze this plan and its impact on the neighborhood. Its outcome awaits the response of citizens and local, state, and federal officials. Therefore, it is still a tentative plan, and its resolution is far from completion. Most all agree that economically and psychologically this unsolved public riddle damages the neighborhood. A final decision is mandated.

The northern perimeter of Interstate 240 slated for opening in spring 1980 will relieve some of the heavy east/west traffic on North Parkway, but it will likely worsen the north/south traffic in the neighborhood. A major

neighborhood street, McLean, is one of only three road extensions northward across I-240, and it will be the only one officially open to traffic until the other two, Warford and Highland, are completed probably late in 1980.²⁹ Consequently when I-240 opens an influx of north/south traffic will likely go through VECA.

Probably the most noticeable change in a VECA street has been the widening of Trezevant and its present use as a heavily trafficked north/south artery. Huge and noisy trucks move along this once-quiet residential street which initially had no sidewalks and was considered a part of Hein Park.³⁰ Fortunately the homes still have deep lots, even after losing twenty feet of front yard space when the street was widened in the late 1950s. Sidewalks were added when the street was widened. Today Trezevant is a six-lane street.

Maxine Halliburton, successful insurance saleswoman, owns a charming duplex at 704 North Trezevant where she lives with her mother. Sitting at an open window, we had difficulty hearing each other. She still likes the street even though it has become a truck route. The neighborhood is home to her, for her family purchased 1701 Faxon ca. 1921. She loves the trees and the people and says she would not feel at home in a new subdivision.

Additional controversy exists in the neighborhood over the closing of West Drive. Residents of Hein Park observed the changes to Trezevant, and they became alarmed over the increase of traffic through their subdivision. Narrow streets and the lack of sidewalks and curbs concerned residents who feared for pedestrians and children.

The problem was one of lots and lots of cars . . . driving too fast, and it was sort of a cut through between Jackson and North Parkway. Folks could avoid a couple of stop signs or street lights by going down West Drive.³²

The civic group maintained that much of the increased traffic consisted of commuters from Raleigh just as much as local traffic from the predominantly black community north of Jackson. Their complaint was not the color of the skin but that too many drivers were going through a residential subdivision not designed for through traffic. Their first request to close West Drive was denied by the city in 1966.

Some in the black community construed this as a racial issue and started vocal complaints. The Hein Park Civic Association persevered in its efforts, and finally the City Council agreed to close this street. The Cypress Health and Safety Committee led by Brother N. T. Greene went to court to stop the closing. The lower court (circuit) ruled that the street "could be closed and that no racial bias was shown."³³ Finally in the spring of 1979 West Drive was officially closed. The barrier across the street was

really nothing more than a curb with a sidewalk extended across the street. It's more a visual barrier than anything else. Emergency vehicles can cross it . . . as can anyone else.³⁴

(See picture) Residents of Hein Park bore the expense of constructing the barrier. The case was appealed to the U. S. Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals. The decision, based on a two to one ruling, stated that the closing was a violation of the thirteenth amendment and that the barrier must be removed. On November 20, 1979, the city filed a petition to have the case reheard "en banc." The Sixth Circuit Court denied the city's request and remanded the six-year-old case to U. S. District Judge Robert M. McRae, Jr. to "fashion appropriate injunction relief."³⁵ The city filed an appeal. The most recent announcement states that the city may leave the barrier "while the city petitions the U. S. Supreme Court to hear the case."³⁶