

In fairness to all concerned, it must be pointed out that not all of the white residents of Hein Park concurred with the closing.³⁷ Neither was their unanimity among the black residents of the VECA area as to opposing the closing. A. W. Willis, Jr., black executive who recently purchased the Weber home on West Drive, would like to see it stay closed. "As a matter of fact, I like the peace and quietness on the dead-end street now, and I'm not looking forward to seeing the cars zoom through there . . ." ³⁸ This issue has been detrimental to race relations. N. T. Greene declined to be interviewed for this history. It has also occasioned a coolness between the Hein Park Civic Association and VECA. The latter organization did not take an official stand on the matter, and the Hein Park Association considered that lack of support. This issue also calls for a final solution.

The condition of most of the streets in VECA is fair to good. Those which were in poor condition are being resurfaced by the Office of Housing and Community Development. There are presently no further plans in the Five-Year-Capital Improvement Program, i.e. budgeted and approved by city council, for the streets in the neighborhood.³⁹

Today good public transportation is available for the neighborhood. There are eight buses serving the area; two are express. All lines lead to Main Street except the Crosstown. It takes from fifteen to twenty-five minutes to get downtown from the VECA neighborhood. There have been suggestions about using the L & N tracks for a future mass transit service or as an alternate to the expressway through Overton Park. VECA took an official stand against the latter.

Federal policy forced whites to accept neighborhood integration. The Fair Housing Act of 1968 made it illegal to discriminate because of race, so every neighborhood became potentially an integrated one. In VECA in the 1960s black residents started slowly to move onto previously all

white streets. Blacks had always lived north of Cypress Creek. Klondike on the northwest and Hyde Park on the northeast were early black neighborhoods, and a few "colored" residents were listed in the Vollintine/Evergreen section as early as 1890.⁴⁰ By 1969 blacks were spilling over in increasingly large numbers. White flight began, encouraged by blockbusting. It appeared to observers that Vollintine/Evergreen, like other Memphis neighborhoods, would quickly go black. It was at that point in 1969-70 that the neighborhood organization, VECA, came into being and worked not to freeze out the blacks but to keep whites there. Commenting on VECA's efforts, resident Modeane Thompson said,

I think VECA was very effective in stabilizing the neighborhood, because signs were springing up like mushrooms, especially on McLean . . . VECA really went to work door to door campaigning and having town hall meetings.⁴¹

Thus this neighborhood was able to avoid the dramatic white flight a neighborhood such as Cherokee experienced. Rick Thomas accounts for this by saying that the people in VECA "had much deeper roots in the area."⁴² Also they were older and for that reason fairly immobile, "but they were also highly educated and fairly affluent and perhaps had different attitudes, different ideas about what was taking place . . ."⁴³

Another stabilizing factor was the fact that the blacks moving in were mostly well-educated and professionally employed. They were interested in the same type neighborhood as the white families.⁴⁴ "I liked the greenery, the trees and the neighborliness of the area and also the fact that the proximity to my job was very reasonable. It was very convenient," said Charles Scruggs, General Manager of WDIA Radio Station. Furthermore, said his wife, Jean, "one of the things that sold us was the schools, Northside and Vollentine and the churches. Those were the things that really sold us and I felt that any community, that had this cluster so close had to be a pretty good community."⁴⁵

VECA's efforts at stabilization were noteworthy and productive. They challenged blockbusting, and they did slow the racial transition. For the most part, the neighborhood has successfully integrated. While certain sections of the neighborhood still attract white families, other areas are now totally black. Those are generally north of Vollintine near the western and eastern boundaries of the neighborhood.

Two areas cause special concern to black and white residents. The comments of George Brown, Jr., black attorney and school board member, on this situation typify the views of other area residents: "I think that if there are two concerns in the neighborhood, the number one would be the property on Brown between McLean and Evergreen and the other would be the property at Vollintine and Watkins."⁴⁶

The first is a very poor and delapidated section of housing, owned by the Black Horse Group, Inc., a real estate company headed by black attorney, Russell E. Sugarmon, Jr. He admits that the property which includes twenty duplexes in a square block area is in deplorable condition. But he says there is no way that the company can make improvements "in return for \$25 a month (rental)."⁴⁷ Sugarmon plans to rehabilitate them under the Community Development program which makes 3 percent interest loans available but that takes time, he states.⁴⁸

The Office of Housing and Community Development designated an area bounded by Chelsea on the north, Evergreen/Belvedere on the west, Vollintine on the south, and University on the east as the Vollintine/Evergreen neighborhood strategy area. This means that the city will be doing housing rehabilitation and street improvements in that location.⁴⁹ \$850,000 will be spent on improvements. Public funds are being used to develop the ten-acre University Park at University and Edward. There will be an addition of four tennis courts and a ten-foot wide paved Vollintine/Evergreen Bikeway which will run from University to Watkins. Gooch Park, 10.2 acres, at University

and Hunter is also having an overall site improvement.⁵⁰ This public expenditure will greatly improve this impoverished area on the northern end of VECA.

The second area George Brown mentioned is a neighborhood eyesore; it is the Saints' Courts Apartments at the corner of Vollintine and Watkins. It was originally Vollintine Courts, a white apartment project, built by Bill Clark in the late 1940s. The Clarks sold it many years ago. In 1976 the Morning Star Holiness Church, located at 3161 Park Avenue, and A. W. Willis and his company, W. W. Investments, purchased the properties, one on the east of Watkins and one on the west side. Universal Life Insurance Co. holds the mortgage.⁵¹ At the time of the purchase, the units were 80 percent occupied; most tenants were black. In September 1977 the church, a non-profit institution, applied for a Section 8 grant from the U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and received a conditional commitment for \$2.3 million.⁵² In February 1978 the apartments were vacated, since it was assumed that a firm commitment would be granted once the conditional grant had been received. This was not the way it worked; the two parties entered into two years of negotiations consisting of applications, promises, and disillusionment. All the time the apartments stood vacant, vandals had a field day. Two fires, one set by firemen during the strike in 1979, further damaged the apartments. The city built a \$20,000 six-foot fence to prevent vagrants and vandals from dismantling the buildings. In the time lapse, all sides complain about one another. Property values around the apartments have suffered.

Hopes were high in September 1979 when the owners received the "long awaited commitment by the federal government to insure a mortgage loan of up to \$2.6 million."⁵³ The owners hoped, a newspaper article stated, to close in six weeks. The commitment was based on a rate of 7.5 percent. Before the project could be financed, the bond market jumped well above the commitment rate. Consequently, the owners were unable to finance at that rate. The owners requested a time extension.

In December 1979 the city acted to begin condemnation procedures. The owners were invited to appear at a hearing to defend the delays before condemnation of the property takes place. "Our position is that for the sake of the neighborhood and the units, we can't wait any longer . . ." stated Charlie Hill, deputy director of Community Development.⁵⁴

This action preceded threatened legal action by VECA against the city for not enforcing city ordinances which require upkeep of the apartment complex by its owners.⁵⁵ In all, this is a trying situation. The owners claim that they have been misled and mistreated and that they have much money invested in the apartments. The neighborhood wants proper renovation or demolition of the units. Community Development prefers to see the units rehabilitated, because they maintain that housing is too dear to waste and the property has good potential for low to moderate income housing.⁵⁶ The probable outcome is that the city will give the owners more time to make another attempt at a federal program called G.M.M.A., i.e. a mortgage purchase program, which will be available February 1, 1980. This has the potential to move faster than any other avenue to re-finance the rehabilitation. If that fails then the city is prepared to move for condemnation.⁵⁷

On a more positive note public funds have been put to good use in the Brown Street area. This will help salvage the northern boundary of VECA. Then it behooves the city to enforce city ordinances for upkeep of properties.

Another important public policy area is the schools. Initially, local public policy occasioned their building, their staffing, and operation. In 1954 federal public policy began to dominate school procedure. The Supreme Court delivered its monumental desegregation decision which ". . . not only altered the nation's educational patterns but also eroded a way of life and touched people's most sensitive nerves."⁵⁸ Followed by other civil rights acts which included busing, these federal policies reshaped America's cities and neighborhoods. Inner and central city neighborhoods became increasingly black; whites moved

in large numbers to the suburbs. The white community in Memphis has in many cases abandoned the public schools, even such traditionally good ones as Snowden and Vollentine.

VECA as an integrated neighborhood has no busing at the elementary level; children are paired at the two neighborhood schools, Snowden and Vollentine. This is a more ideal situation for children and parents. Presently many programs are underway to assist the public schools to regain the confidence of the city's citizens. This will benefit the neighborhood.

Crime is an ever-present ill in our society. This neighborhood is experiencing some increase as is the city at large. A new program called Police and Community Enterprise (PACE) which is funded and coordinated by Housing and Community Development and the Planning and Development Division of the Memphis Police Department is underway in several target areas in the city. Two, of these, Hyde Park and Klondike are close to VECA. This project is designed to increase citizen participation in crime prevention.⁵⁹