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GREAT ARTICLE

Artsy White Rock neighborhood fighting to preserve charm

Some say teardowns tear at charm of White Rock neighborhood, push for conservation district

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By DAVID FLICK / The Dallas Morning News
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Mary Jane Dietz watched with delight as Little Forest Hills emerged again as the close-knit, vibrant neighborhood she remembered from her childhood.

But it would have suited her just fine if the rest of the city hadn't found out about it.

Though physically located in the northern half of Dallas, the collection of about 900 homes near the eastern shore of White Rock Lake is closer in spirit to the artistic, disheveled streets of south Austin.

Pickups still adorned with bumper stickers endorsing Kinky Friedman for governor are parked along the heavily wooded streets. Swings hang on the porches of small houses built 60 to 80 years ago, while a motorcycle may lean in the driveway. Some lawns are neatly trimmed. Others make an environmental statement. Many display pieces of metal or wood sculpture.

That spirit is what backers and opponents say is at the heart of the current battle over a proposed conservation district. Supporters have adopted the slogan "Keep Little Forest Hills Funky," while opponents argue that new construction is needed if the neighborhood is to thrive.

Ms. Dietz, 59, first visited Little Forest Hills in the 1950s, when she came to her grandparents' 1,000-square-foot Craftsman-style house on Angora Street. Even then, she said, the place had a small-town feel.

"It was working people. My grandfather drove a bus for Greyhound, and the woman across the street worked for the phone company," she said. "The houses were all very small. This was when people didn't feel that each child had to have their own room."

She liked the neighborhood enough that she moved into her grandparents' house in 1980 and bought it in 1984. By that time, many of the neighborhood's original owners had moved out, died or were elderly. The housing stock was in decline.

That changed in the 1990s when artists, who had been present for a decade, began moving into the neighborhood in greater numbers. Families of young professionals followed.

"It was nice," Ms. Dietz said, "you'd go down the street and you'd pass a tree that had a swing where there wasn't one before, because now the house had children."

She added, not happily: "Then we got discovered."

Jump in popularity

Word of mouth about Little Forest Hills had been building for some time, but several residents said the neighborhood first achieved citywide visibility in 2000, when the *Dallas Observer* named it the "Best Neighborhood in Dallas."

The increased interest, some say, helped hasten the influx of people, and that led to the teardown of some existing houses.

One of the newcomers is Eric Bell, an architect who recently moved to Little Forest Hills from Lakewood Heights.

"We liked the proximity to downtown, the eclecticism of the neighborhood. We didn't want to move to a place that was like the suburbs," he said.

But rather than buy one of the original houses, the Bells bought a new one that -- at 2,890 square feet -- was more than twice the size of the structure it replaced.

Some residents complain that such homes are introducing the suburbanization that Mr. Bell wanted to escape. But he says critics are missing the point.

"If you don't allow new development, not all neighborhoods are going to go up. It could go the other way," he said. "Not all old houses are going to be fixed up. Some are going to become empty lots if you can't build something new on the property."

The teardowns prompted the push for a conservation district, which, if approved, would restrict residential height and density. The proposal also would govern how much of the lot a house could cover.

Jeff Dworkin, who built Mr. Bell's house, said the restrictions would, in effect, ban new homes larger than 1,600 square feet.

"With its great location, people want to move in there, but they don't want houses that small," said Mr. Dworkin, president of JLD Homes.

He argues that his houses maintain the neighborhood's off-brand feel and warns that any neighborhood that hampers new construction flirts with decline.

"Twenty years from now, when some of these homes are 100 years old, they won't be able to be replaced," he said. "By building houses, are you ruining the neighborhood or are you bringing in new people?"

Billie Freeman, 83, who has lived on San Fernando Way since 1946, is an enthusiastic supporter of the proposed restrictions, saying the new houses could price out existing residents.

"When you get houses selling for \$439,000, it makes my taxes go up, too," she said.

Affordability is one reason Little Forest Hills has attracted creative people, Mrs. Freeman said.

"Most artists really can't afford big mortgages," said Kevin Obregon, who serves as the artists' liaison in the Little Forest Hills Neighborhood Association.

Mr. Obregon estimates the neighborhood has 75 working artists, attracted by the proximity to White Rock Lake and downtown. The open-mindedness of the place, which has long harbored a significant gay community, is also a draw, he said.

The lots are large enough to accommodate a working studio. Residents have a live-and-let-live attitude, bolstered by the ample space between houses, Mr. Obregon said.

"It's the sort of place that people don't mind if you're working in your studio at 10 o'clock at night," he said.

A tight community

Christie Turner, the association's president, said the neighborhood's tolerance and diversity have created an identity that pulls residents together.

"What impresses me about this place is the volunteerism," she said.

The association's Web site is littered with references to volunteer organizations and activities -- neighborhood-wide garage sales, garden tours, art tours, a Fourth of July parade and a Yard of the Month contest. Mr. Obregon is forming a group dedicated to creating community artwork, such as wall murals or sidewalk paintings.

Among the best-known groups in Little Forest Hills are the Fix It Folks, a dozen or so volunteers who meet on weekends to perform small household repairs for the neighborhood's elderly or seriously ill residents.

"We're not just a collection of homeowners. We can come together to do something like this. It's neighborly," said Linda Calvert, who leads the group.

She came to live in Little Forest Hills almost by accident. In 1995, when she was a resident of Plano, Ms. Calvert was helping a friend plan a wedding by visiting a church on Oldgate Lane. She saw an interesting house on the corner of San Fernando Way and, on a whim, asked the friend to drive down the street.

"I saw all these tiny little houses and big trees and fell in love. I said this is where I want to live," she said.

Six months later, she bought a house there.

"We joke that you can't go for a walk," she said. "You'll call someone and say you'll walk over to their house for coffee, and it takes an hour because you keep stopping to talk to people."

That sense of community may be endangered, according to Dean Terry, a documentary filmmaker.

Mr. Terry's award-winning film *Subdivided* contrasts Little Forest Hills with life in the suburbs north of Dallas, which he depicts as sterile and impersonal.

Mr. Terry said Little Forest Hills was a much less attractive place in the 1970s, when he grew up there.

"It was a little bit of a rough neighborhood back then," he said. "All I wanted to do was leave, like lots of teenagers."

He went to California, returned to Dallas and eventually decided to make a film about his old neighborhood. Shot earlier this decade, the film has been shown on public television and at film festivals -- carrying the fame of Little Forest Hills far beyond the boundaries of Dallas.

Mr. Terry attributes the success of Little Forest Hills to its sense of tolerance and to the leadership of a small group of people who "rather than watch television at night, went out and tried to fix things up."

But that kind of spirit is as fragile as it is rare, he said. He worries that divisiveness over a proposal designed to protect the small-town feel of the neighborhood may actually erode it.

"The whole issue has caused a lot of rifts among people who live there. The place is less harmonious than it was," Mr. Terry said.

"I've started feeling that the film will become a historical document, because the community I saw when I filmed there may not be there anymore."

For him, the best of Little Forest Hills was reflected in the neighborhood Fourth of July Parade in 2004.

"Half the residents were in the parade. You had kids on bicycles, and it was obvious nobody worked too hard on building the floats," Mr. Terry said.

"But it was just a great feeling, and I think at that moment I was more proud of the place I had grown up in than at any other time in my life."

AREA'S HOUSE SIZES

Square footage	Number of houses
700-1,200	625
1,201-1,900	252
1,901-2,700	22
2,701-4,000	5

SOURCE: Little Forest Hills Neighborhood Association