

North Central Carbondale Neighborhood Meeting
16 January 2012
Hickory Lodge Park
7:00 – 8:30 p.m.

Over 60 area residents attended this standing room only meeting called by Jane Adams on 12 January 2012. Ms. Adams opened the meeting by stating how thrilled she was to see so many people turn out on such short notice and with such unusual notification (in addition to Facebook and email, several people printed and distributed flyers door-to-door to get the word out). Ms. Adams noted that a number of people had called her regarding the warehouse/auto repair shop in the former Coke Warehouse and when she published her view on that topic got a number of responses from residents on that and other topics, most urgently the upcoming potential sale of the Armory on the corner of Sycamore and Oakland. The State of Illinois owns the Armory and is accepting bids until January 20. The State will then decide what is to happen. The City is only involved to the extent that the property is zoned, and can therefore be regulated, by City codes. Ms. Adams wished to solicit input from the people who live here prior to the City Council meeting scheduled 17 January.

Ms. Adams would also like to encourage the area to form a permanent neighborhood association with officers, bylaws, a plan of action etc. There have been a number of issue-driven organizations in the past but there is a need for a permanent organization. This area is undergoing a generational transition with some properties moving to rentals as their former owners die or move. The area needs a place to come together to plan and advocate for its needs. In addition to the Neighborhood Watch program, the Neighborhood Assistance Team (which coordinates with Code enforcement), and MAP your Neighborhood for Disaster Preparedness, an association can help network people in the community so we can all mobilize around what happens in our area and are more unified and active in presenting these views to the Council. We need to make our boundary larger as what happens on the periphery of an area eventually impacts its center.

The meeting tonight will focus on the Armory. Kevin Baity, new City Manager, was introduced as well as Senior Planner, Chris Wallace, and Don Monty, City Council member. Mr. Baity attended to answer questions about the zoning of the Armory and other concerns of the neighborhood. Mr. Baity distributed a map of the Armory which noted its zoning as primarily Residential, single family (R1) and Residential, high density (R3). He distributed a handout, printed from: <http://www.sterlingcodifiers.com/codebook/printnow.php> which explained in detail R3 coding and the potential uses possible. He noted that bids are due to the state on January 20th. Bids can be rejected; the high bidder does not necessarily “win,” and the Governor needs to approve the sale. There are also Armory properties for sale in Cairo and in Harrisburg.

Questions were accepted from the floor.

Q. What is being done/has been done/can be done to address environmental issues of lead paint, asbestos, the fire range, the diesel storage tanks on the Armory property?

A. The City is a bystander, as are residents. Asbestos in the main building has been removed already and the fire range has also been removed. The fueling station is fairly new, less than 10 years old, and there are safeguards in place to detect leaks, etc. When the building was painted gray a few years ago, the windows were replaced. The structure is sound.

Q. Because of the age of the building and its uniqueness, is it on the historic registry?

A. It is on the inventory list of buildings with “historic potential.” Depending upon who buys it, it could be added. The “inventory list” does not provide protection for the building. It was originally built by Ralph Arnold in 1938 as a WPA project. The only other WPA project building standing in Carbondale is the Central lab on Chautauqua St. Nothing prevents this building from being on the Historic Building list other than a request from its owner.

Q. Why is part of this property listed as R3?

A. Rumor has it that a private person owned the property and wished to have it rezoned so it would bring a higher price when he sold it. The Armory then bought the property.

Q. High light levels are a problem with large, tall buildings. Is there anything the City can do to protect residents from ugly, bright, tall lights?

A. Certain guidelines must be met. The recommendation is for lights to be aimed downward. The use of wall panel lighting is also useful to ensure safety for people in parking lots around large buildings. The City is now looking at updating the zoning ordinances to address this question. Don Monty noted that if you interested in this topic, keep your eye on the zoning ordinances. The planning commission and then the City council will soon be reviewing potential changes to code.

Q. Is there any specific language in the City’s Comprehensive Plan regarding the Armory?

A. no

Q. On this R3 parcel, with the diesel tanks. Who will be responsible for those tanks? The purchaser? The state? The City?

A. The City only in as far as Zoning Codes permit. Answer not known.

Q. If someone wanted to divide and use the existing building for functions and make the R3 part a parking lot, could this be done?

A. yes, with re-zoning.

Q. Since the building was built before the City was zoned, why won't all the grandfathering use potential go away when the government sells the building? Unless someone wanted to use the building as a "military organization" (and there is only one military in the U.S.), it seems clear that there is no "prior use" that could be grandfathered.

A. Look at the permitted uses on the property. See the handout.

Ed Van Awken read a prepared statement.

"My name is Ed Van Awken. I have lived on Sycamore Street since 1974—38 years. From 1965 to 1974 I lived-in Carbondale and frequented this neighborhood often. One could say that I was very aware of this neighborhood since 1968, or for about the last 44 years. I also worked for Housing and Urban Renewal as a housing officer and a contractor. I renovated many of the homes in this neighborhood. I majored in history at SIU and I know a lot about the history of Carbondale and I am a preservation commissioner.

I want to first say that I am pleased that you held this meeting here at Hickory Lodge. I was active in preserving this beautiful 8.2 acre park. For years I was a member of the task force here to try and come up with creative ways to promote this beautiful park. The task force did make strides in finding ways to promote the place. Most of the ideas faded but we all agreed on the idea that people have to use this place or lose it.

My point is very simple. This neighborhood is struggling. I would say that this northwest neighborhood was not in decline from its origins in the late 1800s and through its grown period from 1925 – 1970. I would put the start of this neighborhood in the declining category in the decade of the 1970s.

A case can be made that zoning has helped some neighborhoods abut in my view this neighborhood has been negatively affected by some zoning laws that came into existence in the 1970s.

Having community people try and solve this declining neighborhood is helpful but it is not near enough. To solve this problem, you have to focus on the root cause of the problem. Whether the problem is the former high school or the former grade school or the armory or the former Kitties market or Ruth's Market and Laundry or the former market at Poplar and Pecan, I believe, or the former coke offices and warehouses, the root cause of the decline is the zoning term "legal non-conforming." The term is terribly confusing and negative in its application. If you must have this negative impact law, it needs a new image. This law needs to be more inclusive and less discriminating.

I think that the solution is to look at someone who is trying to make an economically viable solution (free market solutions) to a non conforming building as the solution to the problem.

I think a good way is to look at neighborhoods in Chicago or other cities that have 500,000 people and up living in town houses that are right next to coffee houses, schools, churches, bed and breakfasts, grocery stores, and even taverns. Etc.

You have to be careful with a variance—an auto repair shop is a stretch and would probably not be permitted in the above Chicago neighborhood.

But I have to say that the former Coke soda building looks nicer now than it has since 1973. So the answer is simple: let the free market solve these non-conforming buildings. Think of it like a horse--you have to nurture the animal to get any work out of it. Right now someone who wants to make an economically viable use out of these buildings is treated like an Indian at a Cowboy convention. Try and select some uses that you can promote like Bed and Breakfasts, coffee houses, etc. and open up the variances for the free market solutions.

Q. What is the value of the property?

A. The county assessor's office was asked that question and there is nothing to compare it to here or anywhere close. The building has no assessed valuation but based on the information available it may be valued between \$12,000 and \$120,000 as a fair market value.

Q. Is the City interested in this property?

A. Not at liberty to discuss as this will be discussed in a closed session of the city council tomorrow.

Q. When asked "what is the neighborhood opinion, what do we want?" it seems that we should wash away "grandfather." That function has gone away. Now it is zoned R1, R3. Let's develop the neighborhood. It is to be hoped that the City would treat any use here as "new" use as when any property changes occupancy here and it has to be brought up to new codes.

A. [(from the note taker): This question came up a couple of times but there was no answer.]

Q. Have any similar properties been sold elsewhere? What was done with them?

A. D. Gorton mentioned a couple that were transformed into community centers.

Q. If the building is not sold, then who maintains it?

A. Theoretically, the State. The State is a higher unit of government and the city cannot tell the state "to cut the grass."

Q. Would the City consider purchasing the building and making it a Community Center. There are several organizations that could rent space and there are several other potential uses that may bring revenue to the city.

A. The City has several pieces of property and right now has an overabundance of unused space. (It was noted by several in the audience that some of that space is in disrepair and is likely to have a short life span without massive remodeling or repair).

Go to <http://explorecarbondale.com>, click on development services, planning code, etc. for more information about the process and the schedule for changing the city zoning ordinances.

Ms. Adams thanked Mr. Baity and other city staff for attending and answering questions. Several people expressed interest in forming a North Central Carbondale Neighborhood Association and stayed to exchange information and arrange a meeting.

I would like to send a big thank you to Jane Adams for organizing this event and to Mr. Baity and other city staff for answering questions.

Respectfully submitted, Lorie Allen, resident of Sycamore Street since January 1984.