

# *Our Neighborhood*

---

## *Profile*

The West End neighborhood is generally situated between the Park River to the east and north, the West Hartford town line along Prospect Avenue to the west and Capitol Avenue to the south. It encompasses 650 acres. Of this land most, 477 acres, is devoted to residential use (See Appendix A for a complete boundary description).

Thirty-three acres are zoned for high and twenty-six for medium density residential uses, zones R-1 through R-4. An additional 418 acres are zoned low density residential, R-5 through R-8. The remaining 173 acres comprise the business corridors, which are zoned for general and neighborhood business development as well as high density residential and residential-office development, or public land areas. Elizabeth Park and the parcel of land behind the Sisson Avenue Firehouse that stretches out to Farmington Avenue are zoned P, public land.

The housing stock is made up of older single family homes, most of which were built between 1870 and 1930. These houses range from the rather grand old mansions clustered in the north sector to some cozier cottage size houses south of Farmington. They are mixed with old-fashioned 2 and 3 family houses built around 1900 having large rooms, porches, high ceilings and the kind of old fashioned woodwork not found in the apartments and condos of today. A number of apartment buildings, most of which were built in the 1920's, round out the neighborhood's housing stock. Most of the housing in the West End is located in one of five National Register of Historic Places Districts.

A number of institutions also make their home in the West End. Among those that are the most significant both in architectural and cultural terms are the University of Connecticut School of Law, the Hartford Seminary, Noah Webster School, Hartford College for Women, the Connecticut Historical Society, Shepherd Park and a number of churches.

The University of Connecticut School of Law occupies a graceful campus of stone buildings constructed from 1923-1928 in the gothic style. The campus was originally home to The Hartford Seminary. Sometime during its tenure, the seminary donated space on the campus to the community for community gardens and a soccer field. When the campus was sold to the University of Connecticut, the sales agreement stipulated that the gardens and soccer fields remain available to the community, which they do to this day. Meanwhile, The Hartford Seminary is now housed in a strikingly

## ***Our Neighborhood (continued)***

---

modern building designed by Richard Meier, just a half a block away from the law school.

The neighborhood elementary school, Noah Webster, is a beautiful turn of the century Tudor style half timbered building. Constructed in 1900, it is one of the neighborhood landmarks. Farmington Avenue is home to the United Methodist Church, a turn of the century brownstone with its shingle style parsonage. St John's Greek Orthodox Church on Scarborough Street has a distinctive gold onion dome, while the Unitarian Church on Bloomfield Avenue is a sweeping modern affair. Sisson Avenue is home to Shepherd Park's elderly housing whose nucleus is the Alfred Sisson house, the only house of its period, the 1860's, still standing on Sisson Avenue. This is one of only a very few Italianate houses in the West End.

Several churches in the West End are hybrid structures, growing out of houses, with more church-like additions following as the congregations have grown. Several of these are to be found on Prospect Avenue. The Hartford College for Women is similarly housed in a converted house on Elizabeth Street, as is the Connecticut Historical Society. The houses whose uses have become institutional tend to be some of the larger houses on well traveled streets.

The West End is also home to Elizabeth Park, which is noted for its gardens, especially the Rose Garden. The Rose Garden is nationally recognized and serves to draw many out of town visitors to the area during the height of rose season. Elizabeth Park also provides many of the area's residents with a destination for a Sunday stroll. In fair weather, the park is filled with families from infants to grandparents. Many couples and their wedding parties come to the Rose Garden in the summer to take pictures in this picturesque setting. The newly renovated Pond House offers space for large gatherings and meetings, as well as dining.

The neighborhood as a whole owes much of its charm to the canopy of old trees that line our streets and to its architectural fabric that remains largely intact. While there have been many changes to the architecture and patterns of building usage in the neighborhood over the years, these changes have been absorbed without altering the overall character of the neighborhood. This is true in all sections of the neighborhood, from the southeast where in the 1920's apartment buildings replaced large sections of the lower density housing to the north sector where several large houses have been converted to institutional uses. Many large single family

## ***Our Neighborhood (continued)***

---

houses were converted to rooming houses after World War II. In the last 25 years, most of these have been converted back to single families.

However there are areas of blight, particularly along the commercial corridor of Farmington and Sisson Avenues and in the southeast sector. Many of the blighted buildings are owned by absentee landlords. Although blighted buildings are concentrated in the southeast, they can also be found scattered through other parts of the neighborhood. Despite their blighted appearance, many of these buildings remain structurally sound. Rehabilitation of these buildings would visually reconnect them to the street and neighborhood.

The buildings lining Farmington Avenue west of Sherman Street are not so much affected by blight as they are being compromised by a fragmented streetscape. Farmington Avenue was originally a residential street. Over time, it became a commercial and commuting corridor where houses were converted or torn down randomly to be replaced by an unattractive mix of commercial space loosely inspired by the worst of modern architecture, gas stations and drive through trademark structures. It is not a street that echoes the charm of the rest of our neighborhood and it does nothing to contribute to the positive perception of visitors and commuters.

Farmington Avenue and Sisson Avenue comprise the West End's commercial district. Zoning in the commercial areas includes B-4, B-3 and most of the high density residential and mixed use R-1, R-2 and RO-2 zones found in the neighborhood. B-4 zoning is used for neighborhood shopping districts, while B-3 allows more automobile oriented uses such as drive-thru restaurants and used car dealerships. It is important to note here that the more auto-oriented uses allowed by B-3 have had and continue to have a negative impact on the surrounding area.

Fortunately, a plan is being developed by the Farmington Avenue Joint Committee (FAJC) to restore visual cohesiveness, create additional pedestrian nodes, reconnect it to our neighborhood and also encourage neighborhood compatible community development. The neighborhood looks forward to completion of a plan for renewing our commercial district so that it serves more of the shopping and recreation needs of our neighborhood.

The people of the neighborhood are as diverse as the housing stock. As of the 1990 census, we numbered 8,464. At that time 61% of us were white, 21% were African American, 15% Hispanic and 3% Asian. We spanned

## ***Our Neighborhood (continued)***

---

all age groups with households of students, young singles, families of many configurations and ages and the elderly. This may be a result of the fact that the West End's diversity of housing is suitable for many ages and different stations of life. Of the housing units in our neighborhood, 825 were owner occupied and 3,176 were rental units.

Of the adults participating in the 1990 census, 60% of us had education beyond a high school diploma and 20% of us had graduate degrees. On the other hand, 20% of us had not completed high school. The range of income levels is as broad as is the level of educational attainment in the neighborhood. Seven percent of the neighborhood had incomes of over \$100,000 and 6% of the neighborhood had incomes less than \$5000. Though the median family income in 1990 was \$42,000, 7% of our families (nearly 1000 people) lived below the poverty level. No other Hartford neighborhood has such a wide range of incomes. The West End is a diverse neighborhood at many levels; race, education, income, and housing style. The 2000 census will more than likely re-confirm our diversity. The Puerto Rican community is expected to have a larger presence in our neighborhood. There is also a sense in the neighborhood that the population is aging, and that suburbanites and young professionals are moving back into the urban core and choosing the West End as their home.

The different threads of the West End are woven together with many different community connections both formal and informal. That is what brings many of us here and keeps us here. People have moved into the neighborhood to live in an apartment, bought a small first house and then a larger one, as they needed more space. Some of their children now seem to be in the process of repeating this pattern. There are more than a few young people who, having grown up in the West End, are now setting up their own households here in the neighborhood.

"We are a walking neighborhood.", Susan Russell, manager of The Alley, stated to the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving when asked why we have good "social capital." Her statement shows how the physical design of a neighborhood can promote social interaction. Front porches, small lots and a large city park near by, all make it easy to run into neighbors on a casual everyday basis. This regular contact promotes neighborliness and helps makes the West End a special place. The Alley itself is a tangible result of West End neighborliness. When the Alley, a duck pin bowling alley in a basement on Farmington Ave was about to close, 22 families banded together to purchase it and prevent another business from closing.

## ***Our Neighborhood (continued)***

---

The West End is also very well served by public transportation. It has the best bus service in the region in the E bus that passes down Farmington Avenue every 5 minutes during rush hour and every 10 minutes during off peak hours. This increases the livability of the neighborhood for those who do not own automobiles. It also affords those who do own automobiles an alternate mode of transportation. The fact that our access to public transportation is very good, at least by the standards of this city, may become increasingly important as major commuting corridors become more crowded and the commute in from the suburbs more arduous.

The West End Civic Association (WECA) is now over 30 years old. It continues to be a very important institution in our neighborhood. The Association has shown itself over the years to be a flexible enough instrument to take on many different neighborhood issues in order to improve the quality of life for all of us. WECA has taken on an expanded role in the last year by forming a neighborhood NRZ from the civic association. Since the civic association has a long history of activism in the neighborhood forming an NRZ around the existing institution made sense. As an NRZ, it is more necessary than ever that WECA continue to embrace and represent the entire neighborhood. To address this issue, WECA has expanded its Board to specifically include tenants as well as other neighborhood stakeholders.

Noah Webster School is also a very important institution in the neighborhood. It is a place where many different groups meet with the common aim of a quality education for our children. The strengths and weaknesses of Noah Webster ultimately reflect those of our neighborhood. The better the school does at educating our children, the more our neighborhood will prosper. Noah Webster has an excellent reputation, but some feel that it is not doing as good a job as it once did. Student performance on the Connecticut Mastery Test has fluctuated in recent years and the school has been challenged to identify programs, resources, parental involvement and administrative leadership that will provide the support needed to achieve sustained improvement in student performance.

A particular challenge for Noah Webster under these conditions will be to maintain the commitment of the parents in the West End, who have a history of strong involvement and educational values, particularly middle class households which may have access to educational options. This is especially crucial now, at a time when there is increasing competition for high- achieving students by the magnet schools.

## ***Our Neighborhood (continued)***

---

Presently, \$32,000,000 is being allocated for major renovations and an addition at Noah Webster School for the next fiscal year. It is hoped that this renovation will include monies to help close the technology gap.

The many churches in our neighborhood also serve to bring people together. Some, like the United Methodist Church, have been very generous in giving a meeting place to many different community groups and service organizations. In fact, much of this plan was drafted in the basement of the United Methodist Church.

Formerly, the Cheese and Stuff grocery served as an informal community connection, providing a place to bump into ones neighbors. Originally a food co-op, it had grown to be owned by a national health food chain, before it was purchased by Wild Oats and closed. It served as a community bulletin board, making its lobby available for neighborhood notices and a wide range of publications, as well as a place to shop in the neighborhood. It functioned as more than just a grocery store in the life of the community, as the hundreds of people who turned out to protest its closing bear witness to. Its closing left a hole in our community that we are still attempting to fill.

One of the newer institutions in our neighborhood is the Community Service Office. It is located on the corner of Farmington and Girard behind the Arrow Pharmacy. This office provides the space from which our community service officers and the community block organizer can interface with the neighborhood. It serves as reassurance that the neighborhood is well and fairly policed by those who know our neighborhood and work with our citizens. Its importance to our community cannot be overstated.

On balance, the West End is a good place to live and work and play. There are issues, but none that we cannot, with sufficient resolve, overcome. It is hoped that by forming an NRZ we will be gaining new tools to help in our ongoing efforts to preserve and improve our neighborhood in a manner that will benefit all.

### ***The Block Organizer***

The West End Civic Association has a long history of community activism linked to neighborhood issues. A Block Organizer position was created in 1999 through a grant from the Justice Department and the City of Hartford to foster communication among the diversity of its residents. The position

## ***Our Neighborhood (continued)***

---

has continued through the benefit of funding from the Hartford Foundation of Public Giving.

The specific focus of the Organizer's efforts is on residents living in the southeast part of the neighborhood. The West End's housing characteristics has translated into inherently different populations. The southeast sector is predominated by multi-family dwellings with absentee ownership. This housing characteristic in addition to multiple three-family houses, large apartment and senior complexes results in an 80% tenant population in the West End.

Essentially then, southeast sector's issues, revolving around problems such as tenants' rights, poor living conditions, property maintenance, and public safety, had not previously been communicated effectively through the WECA organization because the transience associated with rental properties deterred long-term follow-through of issues. In stark contrast, north of Farmington residents' long tenure and unification around a number of broad and visible issues has led to the creation of specialized committees and specific recommendations to achieve results. This basically boiled down to a situation where southeast sector issues were not disappearing and this led to increased turnover in residents. Organizing block clubs to address these issues has begun to break this cycle.

In the relatively short time since the position was created, the Organizer has effectively brought residents from diverse cultural, ethnic, and economic backgrounds into WECA to voice their concerns, present solutions, and as importantly, participate in the on-going functions of the neighborhood organization. This visibility has brought a number of issues to light and has demonstrated the common ground that can be reached with the right type of communication. Among the notable accomplishments are:

- ♦ A substantial increase in participation in the Public Safety Committee;
- ♦ Raised the issue of rodent control with the City and achieved results that includes on-going monitoring;
- ♦ An increase in the distribution of the WECA newsletter, in particular to the larger apartment buildings that had previously been inaccessible;
- ♦ Enhanced function of the Block Club/Block Captain system
- ♦ Commitment to assisting with youth, seniors and the identification of programmatic needs;
- ♦ Increase in City code inspections;

## ***Our Neighborhood (continued)***

---

- ◆ Identification of targeted properties with a history of problems or violations and tenant involvement in addressing concerns;
- ◆ On-going communications with the Community Services Officer;
- ◆ Identification of quality of life issues and the formulation of effective strategies to achieve action.

These successes do not signify an end but rather a beginning. By reaching common ground, the apparent differences among residents of the West End will be lost to unifying issues and cooperative recognition that *any* issue is a neighborhood concern.

### ***Neighborhood-wide Communications***

The West End's level of citizen involvement rests on a solid communication network. With the addition of the Block Organizer position and her success at engaging the neighborhood, particularly in the southeast section of the neighborhood, WECA's communication network effectively reaches everyone living in the West End. Mechanisms that keep West End residents informed include:

- ◆ WECA's newsletter (distributed every 2 months)
- ◆ WECA's website
- ◆ WECA's general meetings (bimonthly)
- ◆ Sector Representative meetings (quarterly)
- ◆ WECA Executive Committee meetings (monthly)
- ◆ Neighborhood-wide Block Club meeting (biannual)

The Community Service Officer's administration offices behind Arrow Drugstore (at the corner of Farmington and Girard Avenues), serves as a repository for neighborhood news and information. Announcements are posted on the bulletin board along with pertinent news clippings. The CSO office also provides space for the Block organizer. WECA has designated residents responsible for public relations.

### ***Farmington Avenue Joint Committee***

In 1995 a group of West End residents concerned about the future of Farmington Avenue began meeting to discuss how the neighborhood could stop the evident decline of the street and restore it to a grander, more



## ***Our Neighborhood (continued)***

---

economically vibrant place. Recognizing the importance of Farmington Avenue as a gateway to downtown and to points west, it was decided any planning effort must also encompass the neighboring Asylum Hill.

In the spirit of cooperation and collaboration a 20-member committee, the Farmington Avenue Joint Committee (FAJC) was formed. Representatives from the following constituent groups were appointed to serve on this committee: West End Civic Association, Asylum Hill Organizing Project (now Asylum Hill NRZ), the Farmington Avenue Business District, and several at-large groups and institutions such as the Colonial Theater Renaissance Corporation, St. Francis Hospital, the Harriet Beecher Stowe House and the Hartford Growth Council.

For the last 15 to 20 years, Farmington Avenue as a commercial and cultural district has experienced a decline -- to the point where it is negatively impacting perceptions of the neighborhoods. FAJC has identified the following issues that -- taken together -- describe Farmington Avenue's problems, particularly in its two major retail areas. This analysis demonstrates that Farmington Avenue as a commercial and cultural district does not adequately support the community, businesses, the business life and property values of the neighborhood. Unless the situation is remedied, it suggests that the long-term trend for the Avenue and its neighborhoods is downward. Appendix D contains a detailed description of FAJC's findings and vision. The five issues include:

- ◆ Market/economic
- ◆ Traffic and Parking
- ◆ Public Safety
- ◆ Degraded pedestrian and visual environment
- ◆ Poor planning and development controls

FAJC has hired a nationally renowned firm, Project for Public Spaces, to undertake a corridor plan of the Avenue from Union Station to the West Hartford line. The plan will include transportation and parking, marketing, urban design, and implementation, including funding sources. It will include an extensive community participation component. FAJC's vision is to see Farmington Avenue once again become a major asset to our neighborhood and the entire city, serving as a gateway and complementing a revitalized downtown.