

Go!

Show



in stvoices

Over to the right... is blight

By Julia Smillie Carey
STLtoday.com Staff Writer
06/06/2002

My neighborhood is blighted.

In order to proceed with a new development that will plant a big-ass Wal-Mart and Sam's Club in our collective back yard, the City of Maplewood has declared an area a mere handful of blocks from my house "blighted."

Of course, when I first heard the news, I was shocked. I would have been downright outraged if I had any idea whatsoever what blighting was, and how it works.

First, I looked up "blight" in the dictionary, and after a confusing definition involving plant disease, I found it: "something that impairs growth, withers hopes and ambitions or impedes progress and prosperity." Withers hopes and ambitions? How depressing!

Trying to get to blight's bottom, I asked a local reporter — to whom I happen to be married — to help explain it all to me. "Declaring something blighted is the pre-requisite for the city to take it by eminent domain," he said. Yeah, thanks for clarifying. (Am I the only one who doesn't speak this language, whatever it is?)

In case you don't find Maplewood news thrilling, here's the 411: THF Realty wants to develop a section of Maplewood currently occupied largely by single-family homes. Many owners are selling to THF but there are holdouts not ready to give up their homes and see their neighborhood razed.

So what's an innocent development corporation to do? Take the property by assuming eminent domain! Okay, this one I get. I know what it is, and why it is, and I believe it's necessary. Eminent domain — a fancy word for condemnation — allows the city government (and some private agencies, such as the redevelopment corporation founded by THF) to seize properties that don't serve the best interests of the city. You know...slums, dilapidated properties, houses of ill repute, etc.

Basically, an evaluation of the neighborhood declared the area blighted, and the City of Maplewood handed over eminent domain to THF's redevelopment corporation.

So now I get the process, but there's one big thing I don't get. I've driven through and past the streets in question. I know them well. And I can't for the life of me figure out how anyone reached a conclusion that this area qualified as blight.

According to Maplewood Assistant City Manager Anthony Traxler, the neighborhood was put to the litmus test laid out in the Urban Redevelopment Corporation Law, Chapter 353 of the Missouri Revised Statutes. (Watch out...you just know a lengthy quote is coming.) Missouri defines a blighted area as: "That portion of the city within which the legislative authority of such city determines that by reason of age, obsolescence, inadequate or outmoded design or physical deterioration, have become economic and social liabilities and such conditions are conducive to ill health, transmission of disease, crime or inability to pay reasonable taxes."

So which criteria could this neighborhood possibly have met? "All of them," Traxler said.

All of them?

Traxler suggested I contact Economic Development Resources, the company who did the evaluation to get the details of how exactly the criteria were met. "They could probably answer your questions better," he said. (I did try to contact the agent at Economic Development Resources and although the receptionist assured me he'd return my call promptly, I still haven't heard back.)

Now, I assumed that the evaluation company had been hired by the City of Maplewood to assess the best interests of its residents. But nooooo. It seems that the evaluation company was hired by THF Realty. Now, am I just a cynic (yes) or does it raise a red flag to discover THF Realty footed the bill for an assessment that found in THF's favor?

I know I'll probably never find a satisfactory explanation of how and why the neighborhood could possibly be considered a blighted area. In fact, some say it's a pointless query, that the blighting is merely a formality in the development process. But that "formality" is my neighborhood, and the label doesn't do any favors for anyone who lives in Maplewood. We might as well wear a big scarlet "B" on our collective clothing.

It's embarrassing enough for those whose homes are declared blight, but at least they'll sell and move...and move on. The ones I worry most about are those of us who are left, particularly the residents of the bordering areas. Who wants to live next door to a blighted area?

But just imagine trying to sell those homes: "It's a lovely neighborhood. Over to the left we have the Smith's, and over to the right...is blight." Sure, you could argue that it's only a short-term impact on property value. But what about in the long run? "Over to the left we have the Smith's, and over to the right...is Wal-Mart." Any buyers?

Be sure to tune in each Tuesday for Julia Smillie Carey's advice column, [Ask Julia](#).

Check out the [STLVoices Archive](#), or comment on this story in the [STL Exclusives Forum](#).

[\[back\]](#)

[E-mail this Story to a friend](#)

[Printer Friendly](#)