

Sunday, Oct 10

The hamlet of McKownville

McKownville is the neighborhood of 1000 homes in the Town of Guilderland along Western Avenue (US Route 20) immediate west of the City of Albany. It is bounded on the north by the University at Albany, on the west by the Northway (I-87) and on the south by the New York State Thruway. First developed in the early 1900s as a residential neighborhood at the end of the Western Avenue trolley just south of the Albany Country Club, it has remained a vibrant residential community despite intense development both within the community (Stuyvesant Plaza, Executive Park) and nearby (the University at Albany, the Nanotech complex, the Crossgates Mall, the interstate highway system). The McKownville Fire District is served by a volunteer fire department founded in 1918, and its neighborhood association, the McKownville Improvement Association, has actively supported the residential quality of the hamlet since 19??.

The special character, and the fragility, of McKownville as a walkable, mixed-use residential community has been recognized by the state, Albany County and the Town of Guilderland, leading during the past decade to significant investment in improving the pedestrian infrastructure along and near Western Avenue and Fuller Road, the development of a urban park at the former McKownville Reservoir between Western Avenue and Stuyvesant Plaza, and the designation of McKownville as an area of the Town of Guilderland requiring special zoning considerations.

For the University at Albany, the McKownville neighborhood should be viewed as an important asset. Many universities spend significant sums to protect their campus from the surrounding neighborhood. By contrast, McKownville has always been a safe place for families, and since 1968 has been home for a large number of university faculty and staff--it is the only neighborhood within comfortable walking distance of the campus. While there are significant attractions of McKownville as a residential community, its location, surrounded by major institutions, highways and retail development, has created challenges. Traffic on Western Avenue and on Fuller Road is heavy. Highway noise from the Thruway and Northway can be heard constantly in parts of the neighborhood. Smoke from the University Power Plant occasionally blows into the neighborhood. University athletic events take place on the side of campus closest to McKownville, and generate traffic, crowd noise and occasionally noise from fireworks. Problems with the 80 year old storm drainage system in much of the hamlet have been exacerbated by University and retail and other commercial development, leading to flooded basements, more than a few collapsed foundations, and the well-known regular flooding of Western Avenue in front of Stuyvesant Plaza after heavy rainstorms. The Town of Guilderland recently commissioned an engineering study of the storm drainage of the portion of McKownville north of Western Avenue--the estimated remediation cost is \$6 million. These challenges, some of them irremediable, make it all the more important that any action that could threaten the fragile balance of the residential quality in McKownville be looked at very carefully.

II. The Holt-Harris parcel.

A nine-acre parcel of land in McKownville south of the University "ring road" and immediate adjacent to the SEFCU arena and its parking lot is being considered for

purchase by the University. This parcel has hills on two of its sides and is bounded by 15 residences in McKownville. For generations the parcel has been used as a residence for the Holt-Harris family. From the university ring road, the land appears as a heavily wooded hill, adding to the ambiance of the campus. For residents of the neighborhood north of Western Avenue in McKownville the hills and woods act as an essential noise and visual buffer from the often intense level of activity occurring at the SEFCU arena and adjacent athletic fields.

The University has expressed interest in putting a baseball field on the parcel. To do this would require leveling the hills and woods. This would open up the adjacent neighborhood to the noise from the events on that field, and also remove the buffer from the more intense activities just beyond.

The University is planning for a new multiuse (football) stadium adjacent to and east of the SEFCU Arena, with seating for 10,000, but expandable to 24,000 spectators. This facility will substantially increase the intensity of activity just east of the Holt-Harris parcel, making the buffering impact of the hills and woods even more important for the adjacent neighborhood.

III. The End of a Neighborhood?

For more than fifty years the University "ring road" has served as a boundary line to separate the University from McKownville residential parcels. The proposed breaching of that boundary line is viewed with great anxiety by McKownville residents.

More than a few of our 3,000 residents lived here before the University was built and well remember the promise that the University made in 1963 that it would not need to buy any more residential property in McKownville. Since that time, the only incursion of the University south of the ring road was development of the modest and well-buffered Chapel House. The purchase and transformation of the Holt-Harris property into an athletic field, and the resulting degradation of quality of the residences adjacent to the new field, would be a far more substantial incursion. McKownville residents would with considerable justification conclude that the University does not care about the viability of McKownville as a residential community, and the fragile balance of residential assets and liabilities of the community will be destroyed.