

East of Eden

Portland's charm and easy transit give way to infill and traffic east of 82nd. Now leaders and residents are taking action.

Thursday, May 15, 2008

Erin Hoover Barnett **The Oregonian**

Chuck and Tina Ensign trot down their apartment steps and cut through the parking lot behind a Petco on their daily walk to Tina's bus stop.

They hold hands as they cross Southeast 145th midblock, a moment of togetherness before she heads off to her job as an in-home caregiver. Tina spots the No. 4 rolling down Division from around the Hollywood Video. She breaks into a run, hustling across five lanes.

"At least you made the light!" Chuck yells over the rumble of idling trucks. The next bus won't come for another 20 minutes.

The Ensigns live in Portland, but not the one known nationwide for walkable neighborhoods, charming streetscapes and convenient transit. While close-in residents can travel on foot, bike or streetcar, residents east of 82nd navigate busy thoroughfares, some without sidewalks, and often rely on tortuous bus routes.

Tina Ensign works just 2 1/2 miles south of her home. But, unable to afford a car and reluctant to bike or walk when her shift ends at night, she commutes in a "U" on three buses because most routes go east to west.

More low-income people, priced out of the inner city, are moving to outer east -- a part of town least set up to accommodate them. At the same time, outer east has absorbed more than a third of the city's infill housing since 1996, eroding neighborhood character, causing crowding and diminishing its appeal to the middle class.

Officials are paying attention, giving residents hope.

Mayor Tom Potter raised the disparity between outer and inner Portland to block Commissioner Sam Adams' drive for a \$5.5 million bike and pedestrian bridge between the Pearl and Northwest -- a proposal that outraged outer-east residents.

More significant, leaders and residents are crafting an East Portland Action Plan. Initial steps are small, such as cleaning graffiti. But elected and community leaders are pushing for more.

Outer east "is in danger of deteriorating very quickly if we as a city are not paying attention," says Oregon House Speaker Jeff Merkley, who lives in outer east and pushed for the action plan. "This would become Portland's new slum, and we don't want that to happen, so let's get involved now."

The Ensigns feel fortunate to live at Arbor Glen, a low-income apartment complex, where they

pay \$750 a month for three bedrooms.

Tina's unicorn collection nestles on a shelf in their living room. Chuck has decorated the walls with dream catchers he makes from coat hangers. The complex is built around a sunny courtyard with a play structure and a community room.

But the location is a problem.

In outer east, suburban-style neighborhoods were annexed into the city in the 1980s and '90s, with curvy subdivisions ballooning off major roads in some areas and long blocks that filled with houses over decades in others. All favor the automobile.

Public transportation, designed mostly to ferry people downtown, sometimes isn't a big help. Chuck, for one, is hampered by ill health but also can't easily pursue industrial jobs miles north along the Columbia River.

So Tina, 34, supports the family with her \$9.90-an-hour caregiver job and spends more than an hour's pay for a cab on Sundays, when her shift starts earlier than the buses do.

The Ensigns' children also pay a price. Chuck, 34, is home to cook Hamburger Helper or his family-recipe meatloaf, launch model rockets with his son or watch favorite shows with his daughter. But William, 15, and Ambrosia, 10, are hard-pressed to attend school events in the evening without bus service.

Ambrosia looked forward to presenting a story she wrote during a Young Author's evening meeting last month. Chuck figured they'd walk the 25 blocks -- until it started pouring.

"She was not happy when I told her we weren't going to go," Chuck says.

Fran Weick, who manages resident services for Human Solutions, a social service agency, mourns the loss of close-in city neighborhoods that served a mix of residents. The agency owns the Ensigns' complex and 13 others in outer east, Gresham and Fairview. It strains to shelter and teach job and life skills to an increasingly diverse client base.

"The rebirth of the city," Weick says, "is an upper-income phenomenon."

Jim Chasse, another resident of outer east, has watched infill scar his once-sought-after neighborhood.

Chasse bought his ranch-style home 21 years ago, back when people wanted big lots outside the city. His home on Southeast 116th boasts eight Douglas firs in its front yard. Chasse loves his spacious double lot and, as a mechanic, an oversize garage where he can repair his car.

But after Portland annexed neighborhoods like his, big irregular lots became vulnerable to infill. When the housing boom started in 2002, his Powellhurst-Gilbert neighborhood became ground zero.

Chasse, 52 and divorced, pulls on a jacket and offers a tour. As chairman of his neighborhood's land-use committee, he likes to keep an eye on building projects and tries to do that on foot.

His block is among those largely untouched by infill, thanks to restrictions set down when the homes were built. So he cuts through on a path to 118th to show what's happened on nearby blocks.

Here bungalows sit next to Cape Cods, Dutch Colonials and ranches, signs that the block was built out over several eras. Chasse says that mix made it difficult to fight infill with the claim that new housing would mar the neighborhood's character. Aided by city zoning designed to encourage density, many homeowners subdivided their lots and sold to builders.

Chasse stands in front of a well-kept ranch home with a new two-story duplex on a flag lot in its backyard.

"We were part of a grand experiment -- infill -- without really looking at the neighborhood," Chasse says.

Chasse walks on toward Powell, the rush of cars growing louder.

He believes residents must learn to accept infill, because it's already here and it's necessary to avoid sprawl. But the added traffic is vexing.

Powell lacks sidewalks here, so reaching a bus stop or taking a walk means treading the gravel shoulder as cars whoosh by. Crossing Powell on foot is especially harrowing.

Chasse found a way to avoid frustration when he drives, however. His block has a crosswalk because of a nearby school. So when he heads to work in inner Southeast, he hops out of his car and hits the crosswalk button. Rush-hour traffic halts, enabling him to turn right and head west to the other part of town.

Efforts to aid outer east were helped along by someone who sees the problems every day.

Merkley, the House Speaker and U.S. Senate candidate, lived and worked in inner Northeast when crack cocaine and gang violence surged in the early 1990s. He saw how neglect and concentrated poverty can devastate a neighborhood.

Back living in his boyhood neighborhood in outer east, Merkley saw signs of that same spiral. So in the summer of 2006, he began inviting city and county leaders, most of whom live west of 82nd, to grab a lawn chair and meet with neighbors in his Mill Park backyard. The effort helped persuade Potter and others to act.

"More resources are going to have to go into that area," Potter says, "and rather than do it piecemeal and throw things at east Portland, why not do it in a planned way?"

The city and county convened 49 people, including Jim Chasse and a staffer from Human Solutions, to serve on an East Portland Action Plan committee. They used an analysis the city did last year of challenges in outer east as a road map.

Potter, Merkley and Multnomah County Chairman Ted Wheeler kicked off the first meeting in December. The committee will wrap up its first phase by July, focusing on small, immediate improvements doable with their roughly \$55,000 budget.

Barry Manning, the city planning employee who is managing the committee, says the group realized that to be successful, they first needed to engage their neighbors. Improving public safety was a big priority.

They launched plans to clean up graffiti, to teach immigrant and other less-connected groups how to help police tackle crime problems, and to hire an organizer to get people outside traditional neighborhood networks more involved.

Potter has requested \$500,000 to continue work in 2008-09 and is confident other commissioners will support that.

Chasse and other residents know there's a big difference between graffiti cleanup and pouring sidewalks, but they see the action plan as a framework to go further.

And the community spirit is spreading. At the Ensigns' apartments, Chuck joined the neighborhood watch. This year, the group successfully lobbied TriMet officials to move a bus stop on Powell. Bus riders now wait on a paved shoulder instead of rutted gravel.

"It makes you think that maybe something can be done," Chuck says. "It's so ridiculously small . . . but it's something."

Erin Hoover Barnett: 503-294-5011; ehbarnett@news.oregonian.com

©2008 The Oregonian